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The United States and the Gulf States: Alliance In Need+

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While the Gulf Arab monarchies view U.S. protection as an important element in their security, they traditionally wanted to keep the American role "over the horizon." During periods of crisis, they have shown an increasing willingness to bring in direct U.S. intervention. But now they are returning to a more balanced view of how best to defend themselves.

The complexity of the U.S. role in the Gulf was well demonstrated in February 1998 when Iraq, defying the UN Security Council, again prohibited UN inspectors from visiting suspected weapon sites. The United States declared that Saddam Husayn's policies endangered, among others, the Gulf Arab monarchies (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) and unless Iraq resumed cooperation with the UN, Washington intended to defend the Gulf states by bombing Iraq and risking a military flare-up. Yet most Gulf states were reluctant to endorse this U.S. policy.

Certainly, they wanted and expected the United States to defend them but, with the exception of Kuwait, did not allow the use of their land and air space for attacks on Iraq. The Gulf states doubted the effectiveness of U.S. strategy and feared both Saddam's subsequent wrath and criticism of Washington's policies from fellow Arab states, particularly Egypt and Syria.

In this case, the U.S. position as an ally of the Gulf states was been judged with ambivalence and ambiguity both in Washington and Gulf capitals. In some ways, the United States wanted to be the defender more than some Gulf states wanted to be defended. Put another way, while the

Gulf states evidently depended on U.S. defense, at the same time they openly disagreed with the United States on the aims and efficacy of its defenses. (1)

The complicated nature of the U.S. alliance with the Gulf states attests to the complex, special military responsibility it has undertaken to bear there and to the unplanned way this role has developed. What kind of strategic military legacy did the United States have in the Gulf in earlier years and how did the present role of main military defender evolve?

Before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United States was already regarded as a main defender of the Gulf but had little physical or institutional involvement in defense schemes. This role reflected, first and foremost, the Gulf states' weaknesses and inability to defend themselves. Their populations were less than 15 million and their armies ineffective and inexperienced.

Yet the Arab Gulf states themselves were not eager to institutionalize a U.S. military role. Being smaller in terms of population and military power, they feared the wrath of Iran (especially after the Islamic revolution), Iraq, several other Arab states and perhaps the USSR as well. They preferred, whenever possible, to pacify radical Arab states and movements by

mediating their inter-Arab disputes, supporting these regimes verbally, and providing financial aid to other Arab countries in order to appease neighbors and thus render themselves immune from subversion or attack. (2)

They established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 1981, at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, showed the Gulf states' need to defend themselves, albeit through independent action, apart from any great power including the United States. (3) The GCC states highly valued U.S. military assistance but only as a very last--almost unusable--resort. They preferred to deal with threats by diplomatic means, inter-Arab coalitions, and pay-offs to potential aggressors. With the exception of Oman, they therefore were happy that the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) was located "over the horizon," believing that a direct U.S. military presence in the Gulf could only provoke rivals to act against the GCC. (4)

Hence, none of the GCC states entered into a written, official defense agreement with the United States. Regional diplomatic maneuvering was their first line of defense; U.S. intervention would be requested only given the worst possible scenario. It says something about the volatility of the area that this situation of thinking the unthinkable happened twice between the early 1980s and early 1990s, with the Iranian war on tankers (during the Iran-Iraq war) and the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait.

Washington, given its own interests and perceptions, accepted this role. In the American scheme of indirect participation in Gulf defense, this became known as the "two-pillar policy," which saw the Shah-era Iran and Saudi Arabia sharing the main responsibility for Gulf security in the 1970s. After the Iranian revolution, this became the "Carter Doctrine," in the early 1980s, stating Washington's commitment to resist any

party seeking to destabilize the Gulf states and disrupt the Gulf oil flow. The United States acted as defense coordinator, adviser, principal arms' supplier and strategic deterrent against the Soviet Union.

At the same time, though, the United States prepared for the possibility of intervention by forming the RDF in 1984 to provide quick, direct U.S. military assistance to any Gulf state under imminent threat. The RDF would allow for the use of limited force. While the RDF option was not fully developed, some U.S. military units were deployed in the area and the preparations did lay the basis for sending in larger U.S. forces during the reflagging and Kuwait crises later.

The U.S. reflagging operation, as it evolved in 1987 and 1988, was an escalation in terms of intervention, but still a manifestation rather than a transformation of this policy. The United States embarked on direct military activity by escorting U.S.-flagged, GCC states' tankers. However since the UN Security Council sanctioned the reflagging operation and other Western states participated, both Washington and Kuwait (which initially requested the help) were careful to characterize this operation as an international policing activity, and not as a U.S. defense of the GCC.

In addition, the operation hinged on U.S. sea-borne activities, with only minimal GCC states' assistance. There was no need to stationing and dock U.S. vessels in the nearby GCC ports. (5) The international dimensions of the reflagging, the Gulf states' avoidance of playing too obvious a role as U.S. host or ally, and Kuwait's insistence that U.S. ships leave the Gulf at the end of the Iran-Iraq war in August 1988, demonstrate that reflagging was a limited, short-term U.S. military operation, rather than a new type of U.S.-GCC alliance.

The sudden, unplanned assumption of the main military defender's role by the United States in early August 1990, in

contrast to previous occasions, constituted a direct response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the danger posed to Saudi Arabia. In the "Desert Shield" and "Desert Storm" phases, the United States became a leader of an anti-Iraqi coalition. After "Desert Storm," this role reflected new thinking in the Gulf: that the Arab parties were untrustworthy defenders and that GCC reliance on cooperation with radical Arab states had been useless, if not counterproductive.

After all, Iraq, which had been cultivated by most GCC states and notably Kuwait during its war with Iran, was the new predator and the other Arab states were unable to prevent its invasion or persuade Iraq to withdraw. (6) Moreover, other options hinging on Arab military defenses were eliminated. In March 1991, right after "Desert Storm" and with Egyptian and Syrian encouragement, the GCC states signed the "Damascus Declaration," entrusting GCC land defenses to Syrian and Egyptian infantry and armored forces. The United States encouraged this initiative, showing it did not seek to dominate all Gulf defenses but rather concentrate on air defense.

Most important, however, was that the GCC states themselves were unenthusiastic about the declaration. They did not trust Egypt and Syria either politically or in terms of their military ability. The GCC states did not implement the accord nor did they approve a proposal by Sultan Qabus of Oman to establish a 100,000-strong Gulf army. They doubted their own citizens' military ability as much as their fellow Arabs' political intentions. Thus, the U.S. military role emerged as the GCC's post-"Desert Storm" preferable option. (7)

Both the Gulf Arab states and the United States were then prepared to enhance the U.S. military position in the Gulf. Moreover, some new Iraqi attack was still

possible, and an Iranian incursion was not totally out of the question either. In April 1992, Iranian forces expelled the UAE garrison from Abu Musa island and also took control of the Tunb islands, all strategically located near the Hormuz straits at the Gulf entrance. (8) With their own armies totalling less than 250,000 inexperienced men, the Gulf states had no choice but to rely on U.S. defense.

From the U.S. standpoint, maintaining this link was no easy matter. As the Kuwaiti intellectual Muhammad al-Rumayhi noted, U.S. contacts with the Gulf states resembled those of the British Raj several decades earlier: it had to deal with each state separately. There was no U.S.-GCC pact, nor was there a broadly based strategic defense concept shared by Washington and all the GCC states.

Under these circumstances, each GCC state opted for a different arrangement. Saudi Arabia could not agree with the United States during 1991-1992 over the kind of weapons it wanted, or on payment for its military purchases. For these reasons--and given Syrian and Iranian objections to U.S. forces in the Gulf--Riyadh decided not to make an official agreement with Washington.

Kuwait did sign an official defense pact with the United States, on September 18, 1991, and followed it up by pacts with Britain and France. Bahrain also concluded a defense accord with the United States in the same month and, according to unconfirmed reports, its rulers also agreed to house the regional headquarters of the U.S. Central Command. (9)

These agreements, official and unofficial, were based on the understanding that Washington would defend its allies and sell them arms. Both sides had a parallel view on the importance of stability and economic development. The Gulf states also expected U.S. efforts to resolve the Arab-

Israeli conflict so that the PLO and Syria, which had subverted the Gulf states at times during the 1970s and 1980s, would be satisfied and not seek retribution against the Gulf states. For the United States, its lack of experience in the region, having to deal with diverse agreements, and taking on such a new, unplanned commitment made arrangements more difficult. (10)

The U.S. forces did station in the Gulf several thousand infantry and armored forces, (in Kuwait around 3,000-4,000 men), notably as part of the planning of an immediate, initial defense effort. U.S. aircraft carriers could bring several thousand more. These numbers, even together with the 13,000 Kuwaiti forces, still make up a limited force. Therefore, U.S. forces mainly rely on air power: aircraft and ballistic.

This strategy was both successful in "Desert Storm" yet also evinced some significant shortcomings. The United States can destroy hostile forces and thereby deter an immediate incursion into the Gulf but could neither decisively win battles without physical occupation nor bring about political change in Iraq to stop future threats. (11)

While the United States did not define its strategy during the Bush administration, the tone for the Clinton administration was set on May 18, 1992, when the head of the Middle East desk in the National Security Council, Martin Indyk, called U.S. strategy in the Gulf "Dual Containment." Through military and economic boycott, the United States sought to replace Saddam and establish a new government in Iraq and at the same time to induce Iran to embark on a non-hostile, non-aggressive foreign policy toward its neighbors. This policy was often criticized as unfeasible, since European and some Gulf states maintained trade and other economic ties with Iran. Even U.S. oil companies traded with that country through European subsidiaries, until American laws were

tightened by congressional and White House actions in the mid-1990s.

From the GCC countries' standpoint, many of their security problems were internal, linked to potential foreign threats or reactions against an effort to tighten cooperation with the United States. American policy could not deal with these issues, nor did the regional government's desire such interference. Unlike the British Raj in earlier decades, the United States was unable to undertake or develop ways of strengthening unification in the Gulf, or attempt to induce political change, even in a small way. (12)

Since "Desert Storm" these states have been beset by internal opposition and terrorism, mainly from radical Islamic fundamentalist groups. Gulf leaders also fear that Arab states, such as Syria and Egypt, might not support them in times of need and could be dangerous critics or even subversive forces if they are unhappy with GCC policies. Consequently, cooperation with these two states has remained an alternative or at least a legitimizing supplement to their alliance with the United States.

In addition, GCC states also suffer from inter-state disputes and differences--notably between Qatar and Bahrain, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia--over undemarcated borderlines. Egypt emerged as a mediator in these disputes, and Syria a go-between the GCC and Iran. Some Gulf states, particularly Kuwait and Oman, have regarded Iran for decades as a welcome addition to regional security as a way to counter Iraq.

The key implication of these factors for U.S.-GCC relations is that the GCC states' threat perception differs from that of the United States and even among themselves. Gulf security, from the GCC viewpoint, focuses on a variety of tactics, in which the United States has only a limited

role while Egypt, Syria, and Iran each have their own contribution to make.

Further, Syria has remained a factor opposing a closer U.S.- GCC relationship. This stance is partly, but not only, due to the lack of progress on Syria-Israel negotiations. Syria has urged the Gulf states to criticize U.S. policies toward Israel and to pressure Washington to act differently. Gulf states such as Qatar and Oman, which had moved toward normalizing relations with Israel, were consequently forced to freeze their positions in 1995-1996. (13)

How are these modes of cooperation and shortcomings articulated? Between 1991 and 1994 the mode of the U.S.-Gulf states' alliance was cooperative. Both sides interpreted the alliance very broadly and deliberately overlooked any differences, allowing for enhanced cooperation. This was manifested by such activities as Saudi Arabia's consent in 1992 to host the U.S. fleet in Saudi bases, as part of the preparations to bomb Iraq, and seasonal military maneuvers involving Kuwaiti and Omani forces alongside U.S., British and French units.

In this spirit, Washington did not openly object to Kuwaiti and Omani trade relations with Iran and statements about that country's important role in Gulf security, though these policies contradicted "Dual Containment." The United States understood that these relationships added to the Gulf states' confidence and to the GCC's reliance on Washington.

Moreover, progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process, despite Syria's discontent, was quite satisfactory for Jordan and the PLO, and created a positive atmosphere in the entire Middle East, which even the GCC states appreciated. Thus, when a regional crisis arose--such as the war between North and South Yemen (May-August 1994--the U.S. played a role. Fearful of the war's spillover into Saudi Arabia and

possible pro-Iraq, anti-Saudi policies from Yemen, the United States worked quickly to ensure that the crisis did not spill over to involve Saudi intervention or feelings of insecurity. (14)

A second approach evolved during the second half of the 1990s, based largely on the U.S. need to respond to Saddam Husayn's sporadic refusals to cooperate with the UN inspection regime. The means of last resort to cope with this problem were U.S. bombing raids. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Abu Dhabi increasingly viewed these devices as being unable to weaken Saddam, let alone remove him from power. On the contrary, the raids had the effect of eliciting popular support--both in Iraq and other Arab states--for the fate of the Iraqi people suffering from UN sanctions.

Gulf leaders feared that Washington's policies had no defensive effect and recalled U.S. inaction in Iran in the face of the unfolding anti-Shah revolutionary movement which led to his downfall, despite his being a U.S. ally. Saudi Arabian Defense Minister Prince Sultan's visit to Washington in February 1997, brought differences of opinion on this issue to the fore, sharpening the Gulf states' sense of insecurity. The objections of Cairo and Damascus to further bombing of Iraq prompted the GCC states to seek additional security in cooperation with Egypt, Syria and Iran. The fading Arab-Israeli peace process, which made Egypt and Syria angry with Washington, swayed the Gulf regimes to declare growing support for these two states and to be even more critical of the United States. (15) This became a new way to ensure Egypt and Syria supported the Gulf states in the event of a new crisis with Iraq.¹⁶

Moreover, the explosions in U.S. army bases at Dahran (June 1995) and al-Khubar (November 1996), in Saudi Arabia, generated even more tension. From

Washington's viewpoint, the Saudi security forces were too lenient in their investigations. From a Saudi outlook, the U.S. presence in the Gulf had become counterproductive, a target for terrorist attacks. The Saudi way of smoothing over the effects of terrorism by buying off and negotiating a possible truce with the perpetrators, possibly the Bin Laden group, only fed and added to the tension. (17)

In 1996-1998, tension within the alliance was also characterized by mounting criticism based on old pre-1990 arguments. Intellectuals, journalists and others were quoted as saying that the crises only served to establish Washington dominance in the Gulf. Saddam's policies in recent years, they argued, had sought to shake off UN Security Council sanctions, not prepare a new invasion and should, therefore, not trigger an entrenched, aggressive U.S. presence in the Gulf. Moreover, intellectuals ('Abdallah al-Shay'ji of Kuwait University) quoted "conspiracy" perceptions of "simple-minded" people that the United States did not want to remove Saddam in order to justify its continued presence in the Gulf. Others noted that U.S. presence is particularly costly for the Gulf states.¹⁸

Gulf states would again, it seems, like to see U.S. military intervention only in time of need, believing that cooperation with Egypt, Syria and an Iran led by President Muhammad Khatami could diffuse tensions. (19) The United States would be called to intervene in any future invasion.

While this was a return to more traditional policies, the U.S.-GCC relationship had changed and strengthened in two important ways. First, there was the precedent of large-scale American intervention, at the GCC states invitation and with their cooperation. Second, U.S. forces were now present and ready to fight in the Gulf. Consequently, a relationship which before 1990 had largely been a potential alliance was now implemented as a

very real and strategically important one for both sides.

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+Paper prepared for conference on "America's Allies in a Changing World" November 9-10, BESA, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv, sponsored by the BESA Center for Strategic Studies and the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and made possible by the generous support of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.

NOTES

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15) See B. Maddy-Weitzman, "Inter-Arab Relations," in Middle East Contemporary Survey 1995 (NY, 1997) and 1996 (NY, 1998).

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