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# THE FUTURE OF GULF SECURITY AFTER THE KUWAIT WAR

There are many obvious aspects of Gulf security. The strategic importance of the Gulf to the West, together with the West's response to this challenge, constitutes one of the most attention-snaring aspects. But all the posturing and defensive preparations will be for nought unless a viable framework for conflict dissimulation, if not resolution, is created within the Gulf itself. This means not only greater coordination between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and increased commitment to their own defence, but also an enduring *modus vivendi* with Iran and Iraq as well. The prognosis does not look good. As the West has not removed Saddam Husayn, any more than it did its previous nemesis Ayatollah Khomeini, it will have to learn how to control, tolerate and ameliorate Saddam's Iraq. The West has shown that it can mount a successful military campaign to rescue a client from the clutches of aggression. It yet to find the key to deterring the aggression in the first place.

## TWELVE YEARS OF WAR AND CRISIS IN THE GULF

The Western world has long been fond of characterizing the Gulf as turbulent, unstable and crisis-ridden. Politicians, soldiers and journalists alike have frequently asserted that the six small states which now make up the GCC are anachronistic, vulnerable, and dependent on Western protection and guidance.

Although this attitude predated British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, little attempt was made by the West to guarantee the continued stability of countries upon whose oil they had become exceedingly dependent--apart from relying principally on the Shah of Iran, whose throne soon disappeared. Indeed, it was the Iranian revolution, closely followed by the Iran-Iraq war, which provoked the first real attempts to replace the defunct British security umbrella over the Arabian littoral with a more grandiose American one.

Despite two decades of concern, the fact remains that the sequence of cataclysmic events in the vicinity of the Gulf has essentially eddied around the GCC states and has not affected them seriously. The one obvious exception is Kuwait. Even the turmoil of 1978-79 in Iran, with its proclamation of an Islamic revolutionary fervor ready for export, raised considerable apprehension in its neighbors, but had little effective impact, except to accelerate an already manifest trend towards social conservatism.

## THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE GULF

In a purely relative sense, the eight littoral states divide into three categories: large, medium, and small. Strategically, the small states are of only minor concern, since they have minimal disposable wealth (apart from Kuwait), power or influence. They do, however, have a certain veto over Saudi Arabia, as a result of the GCC being a club of equals. At the same time, they can be held captive to the various persuasions that Riyadh can bring to bear. Saudi Arabia is the only medium-sized power. Its direct control of one-quarter of the world's oil reserves, rather more than its (temporarily dissipated) wealth, and its behind-the-scenes involvement in various Middle Eastern, African and Asian disputes have made up, in part, for its handicaps of a small population, limited industrial base, and addiction to a comfortable life.

It is from the two large powers of the Gulf, Iran and Iraq, that the threat to Gulf security (more precisely, the threat to the status quo) has come. In a sense, this is because only these two states have the size and historical ambitions to extend their influence or control around the Gulf. But in the contemporary period, their threat stems more from radical ideologies and aggressive leaderships. In order to create a stable environment in the Gulf, it will be primarily incumbent on the GCC states to find a formula whereby both Iran and Iraq can be coaxed into a forum for discussion and an exchange of views, eventually to be followed by a commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes.

## THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF THE IRAQI INVASION AND WAR

*Echoes of Suez.* The reaction throughout much of the Arab world to the invasion and the strong American response bore an uncanny resemblance to the trauma of Suez in 1956. While the factual circumstances were considerably different, Arab perceptions of the "imperialist" West (led by the United States this time, instead of Britain and France) ganging up to invade an Arab state were ubiquitous. As in 1956, the Arab regimes divided into pro-Western and anti-Western blocs. Similarly, even in "pro-Western" states, there was considerable upswelling of popular support for Egypt's Gamal `Abd al-Nasir in 1956 and for Saddam in 1990. One legacy of the earlier episode was the implantation of bitter convictions of British imperialism, arrogance, and roughshod behaviour when dealing with the Middle East. These attitudes have persisted in the worldview of many government officials, influential merchants, and intellectuals, who had been the impressionable and disillusioned youth of that time. For much of the populace, the suspicions of colonialist Europe of the 1950s have been transferred to superpower America in the 1990s. There are two aspects of this reaction that merit notice for their bearing on Gulf security formulation: first, Arab reaction to an apparent upheaval in Arab ranks, and second, Arab reaction to the American response.

*Arab Re-alignment, or just Another Arab Gulf?* The invasion quickly provoked a realignment of Arab alliances. Some of these shifts startled Western observers, conditioned to interpreting régimes' pro-Western and anti-Western policies as a faithful representation of their underlying "moderate" and "radical" orientations. All too often the distinction between policies of régimes and attitudes of their people has been lost sight of. Arab government policies tend to be tactical, flexible, and often oriented (at least in the medium-term) to pragmatic alliances. While longer-run considerations, such as geopolitical factors, dependence on neighbors for critical resources and ideological orientation, may eventually prevail, there is nothing to prevent the leadership of a state from abruptly launching policy shifts of 180 degrees. Thus Anwar Sadat swept Egypt from Nasirism and dependence on the Soviet Union to capitalism and dependence on the United States virtually overnight. Hafiz al-Asad's secular and Ba`thist Syria embraced a close alliance with Islamic Iran at the beginning of the 1980s and then shifted towards Saudi Arabia and the United States at the beginning of the 1990s.

Two points arise from these observations. First, Arab régimes tend to be one-man or small-elite operations. In the formulation of foreign policy, they have little need to consult with other political parties or interest groups, or to canvas the opinions of their constituents. This is particularly apt for the republics. Second, ideology is often a superficial consideration. Despite their Ba`thist rhetoric, the Iraqi and Syrian régimes were installed and controlled by army officers, not by the original Ba`thi ideologues who were discarded.

Popular moods are more intractable than policies of leaderships. Not surprisingly, they are more attuned to underlying economic factors and skepticism about governments in general. They are also more susceptible to demagoguery, and, having been fed a steady diet of anti-imperialism, exhibit an ingrained suspicion towards the West. Their betrayal by various secular ideologies leaves them responsive to the currents of Islamic politics. Not surprisingly, Saddam Husayn played up all these factors in the months following his invasion of Kuwait.

Flushed with the hubris of a quick victory over an over-matched Iraq, many Western commentators deride warnings of an anti-American or anti-Western backlash. They point to the absence of riots, demonstrations or other visible signs of popular discontent. In fact, the difference between the turbulent streets of the 1950s and the quiet routes of the 1990s is not the growth of apathy, but the consequence of stronger and often more efficiently repressive governments. The invasion of Kuwait brought all the simmering frustrations and hostilities back to the boil. That they appear to have subsided in the aftermath of Iraq's defeat indicates less another seachange in popular opinion than a necessary sublimation of continuing rage.

The cheers of many Arabs at the humbling of the Kuwaitis should not have surprised, as they stemmed from a number of longstanding complaints. Perhaps the oldest of these has been the idealist belief that the Gulf states' oil is in fact an Arab bounty; therefore it should have been shared equally amongst Arabs everywhere from the beginning. At the very least, poorer Arabs feel that the rich Gulf states could and should have done more to spread the wealth around. There was a tinge of humiliation when it was necessary for King Husayn of Jordan to journey to Riyadh cap in hand. There exists more than a twinge of jealousy on the part of superior-feeling Egyptians, Levantines, North Africans and Iraqis that oil should be abundant in countries that they simplistically regard as empty in civilization and inhabited by backward bedouin.

These indignant attitudes, justified or not, have not been helped by the extravagant and inappropriate behaviour of some Gulf Arabs abroad. There is also the disdain with which many Gulf Arabs have come to treat northern Arabs working in the Gulf, and the vulnerability of the Palestinians, in particular, in societies that preclude all possibility of assimilation. This was perhaps most pronounced in Kuwait, home of the largest Palestinian community in the Gulf. A further negative derives from the reputation of Kuwaitis throughout the Arab world for miserliness.

Imperialism or New World Order? Outside the Gulf, the Arab reaction to the interventionist American response to the invasion was preponderantly negative. Cynical views asserted that President Bush's declaration on the dislodging of Iraq from Kuwait as the first test of a "new world order" was either an attempt to capitalise on the collapse of Moscow's influence in the Middle East or an idealistic cover for a more pragmatic impulse to ensure the continuation of oil supplies, or both. To their critics, the plea for Western assistance by Gulf monarchies provided confirmation of their vassal status to the West. Even in the Gulf, opinion was widespread that Washington, London and Paris must have ulterior motives in mind. A considerable cross-section argued that the purpose of the six-week saturation bombing of Iraq was the destruction of Arab military capabilities *vis-à-vis* Israel.

The United States long ago replaced Britain and France as the foremost imperialist bogeyman in Arab perceptions. In part, this conviction springs from an Arab propensity for conspiracy theories and a tendency to blame outsiders for internal problems. This is a familiar story throughout much of the Third World, but it is also true that Washington has foolishly provided too much grist for the rumour mill in the past. A myriad of conspiracy theories sprang up in regard to the American

response to the Iraqi invasion. Disinformation on the extent of the threat posed by Iraq to world order, Bush's demonisation of Saddam Husayn (a factor that directly compelled the Iraqi leader to be inflexible), and especially the ferocity of the attack when it came, all stoked Arab belief in a darker purpose of American intentions.

This approach expedited the war but it also complicated the political *dénouement*. The GCC states have remained reticent and intractable in negotiations over cooperation with the United States in future security arrangements in the Gulf. At the same time, Washington's credibility as an honest broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict has been diminished. The triumph in the desert may have enhanced America's standing at home and throughout the world, but it does not seem to have helped any of its dilemmas in the Middle East.

## PLANNING FOR THE POST-WAR ERA

*Twenty Years of Gulf States Talking About Gulf Security.* Gulf security has long been a topic of discussion but the multitude of consultations and schemes over the years have rarely produced much more than the rhetoric of good intentions. The run-up to British withdrawal from the Gulf (1971) provoked several developments (such as the negotiations for unity among the smaller shaykhdoms of the Arab littoral and the referendum in Bahrain eliminating the Iranian threat of absorption) which, although beneficial of their own accord, had marginal impact on overall regional security. Perhaps the most concerted effort to forge some sort of security framework amongst the eight littoral states was the meeting of all the foreign ministers at Muscat in November 1976. But the deliberations rather predictably foundered over the incompatibility of the two most powerful states. Iraq was distrusted by the other seven because of its radical Ba`thist ideology and history of attempted subversion in the region. Iran was suspect because it was non-Arab and because of fears that the Shah's military buildup was a reprise of a centuries-old drive for Persian hegemony over the Gulf.

It was not until the Iran-Iraq war removed these two countries from consideration for participation in a Gulf security pact that the foundations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (properly, Cooperation Council of the Arab Gulf States) could be laid. With Iraq at war, the other six Arab states could exclude Baghdad with free conscience from their councils (as they had not been able to do previously), while Iranian energies were dissipated by the revolution and refocused on the war.

On the surface, the GCC appeared to be a "natural" association. It formally bound together six monarchies that were on good terms, were socially analogous, were proceeding along similar lines in their economic development, and were equally unable to defend themselves against stronger neighbors, let alone outside threats. It soon became clear that, despite the quick profusion of fraternal agreements and joint organs, the member states disagreed fundamentally over the desired degree of coordination over security (both internal and external), as well as the extent to which reliance was to be placed on extra-regional military assistance. (Ironically, it was generally Kuwait which argued the strongest against involving the US and the West.)

But above all, one paramount concern worried five of the six and caused them to hold back from closer integration. As one Saudi injudiciously put it, the GCC consists of one big shark accompanied by five small pilot fish. Whether on political, military, economic, or cultural grounds, there is an underlying fear of being submerged in a Saudi *Weltanschauung*. Largely for this reason, Kuwait long resisted acceding to the web of bilateral internal security agreements (providing for hot pursuit of suspects, among other things), and the Peninsula Shield force at Hafr al-Batin never had more than symbolic contributions from the small five.

In addition, at the bottom of it all lies the inescapable fact that all six GCC states combined can present only the slimmest deterrence to aggression. Leaving aside the acquisition of sophisticated and expensive arsenals, the fact remains that only Saudi Arabia and Oman possess

armed forces of any note--and even that must be regarded in very relative terms. The attractiveness of a soldier's life to most Saudi citizens is minimal, and the government has found it difficult to maintain an army of some 50,000 troops, plus an only partially effective National Guard of a few thousand more. It is questionable whether stated goals of expansion to 200,000 or even 100,000 can be achieved. The Omani armed forces, a battle-hardened professional military a few years ago, enjoyed little more than counter-insurgency capability until recently; and their subsequent diversification and attrition of battle experience has hampered their professionalisation. The size and/or effectiveness of the other GCC states' armed forces is slight.

Months after the conflict ended, and over a year after it began, the GCC had taken little discernible steps towards enhancing its own defence capabilities. The new security committee, created at the Doha summit in December 1990, held its first meeting in Salalah in March 1991 but there was no visible outcome then or at its meeting in May. Likewise, the GCC foreign ministers' meeting in Kuwait in May 1991 to work out the details of a Gulf peacekeeping force produced little more than a statement welcoming UN deployment along the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. Their next meeting in Dhahran in June had the same result.

## **THE "NEW ARAB ORDER"**

It is not surprising that, in the aftermath of victory and given the sharp fissure in Arab ranks, heavy emphasis should be placed on the creation of a "new Arab order" to enhance the long-term prospects for GCC security. The Saudis seemed determined to abandon their traditional inclination to seek solutions through consensus-building and to wholeheartedly punish the states which abandoned them during this crisis (Jordan, Yemen, the PLO) and embrace those which provided support (Egypt and Syria). In May 1990, King Fahd reiterated the kingdom's cardinal foreign-policy tenet of working towards Arab and Islamic consensus; in February 1991, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, his nephew and Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, was dismissing King Husayn in print as a "goner" and asserting that Saudi Arabia would never forgive those countries which it felt betrayed the kingdom.

The "new Arab order," it would seem, was to be selective, rather than conciliatory. Formal declaration of its goals came in Damascus on 6 March 1991 when the so-called "Arab eight" (the GCC plus Egypt and Syria) agreed that the Egyptian and Syrian military contingents in the Gulf should constitute the nucleus of an Arab peacekeeping force and that the eight states would work together in fostering economic and social development. The latter was to be facilitated by the creation of an Arab development fund with up to \$15bn to disburse. Some Gulf optimists argued that here was an opportunity to guarantee Egyptian and Syrian friendship by integrating their economies into the Gulf's capitalist, private-sector, orientation. While the language of the Damascus communiqué left room for other Arab states to participate in these plans, the remarks of spokesmen left little doubt that this was an exclusionary pact.

*The Volatility of Arab Politics.* Despite the transitory enthusiasm for a "new Arab order," especially one that was essentially divisive and confrontational, there are clear grounds for grave doubts about its feasibility and therefore its success. In part, this conclusion is historical. First, an overriding characteristic of inter-Arab politics in the independent era has been volatility. Underlying the patina of constitutional, ideological, internationally responsible states are more salient factors in Arab regional foreign policy. Unalterable geopolitical determinants are one key component. One can point to Egypt's commanding position at the heart of the Arab world as the result of its strategically central location, far larger population and legacy of cultural/intellectual leadership. Then there is the inexorable rivalry between Damascus and Baghdad for domination of the Fertile Crescent.

But short-term tactical considerations also drive policies: not long ago Nasirist Egypt was aligned with arch-conservative Saudi Arabia against traditionalist Oman, a transient alliance abruptly transformed into belligerence over Yemen--without, it should be remarked, any significant changes in either régime. More recently, Syria entered the Lebanon morass as protector of the Maronite community, and subsequently switched sides when necessary to maintain a rough balance of power.

Another complicating layer to be weighed is that of the mortality of Arab leaders and thus of their personalised policies. This was illustrated in the Iraqi *volte-face* following the 1958 revolution and the murder of Nuri al-Sa'id, the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat, and the deposition of King Sa'ud (a pivotal factor in cementing the Saudi-American axis in Saudi foreign policy which endures to the present). A complementary consideration very much in the short-term picture is the replacement of older "dependable" (in Western eyes) rulers by younger ones, less dependent on their Western connections and more pragmatic or nationalist in their outlooks (such as the replacement of Habib Bourguiba by Zayn al-'Abd al-Din Bin 'Ali in Tunisia). Nowhere does this appear more precipitous in the next decade as in the Gulf monarchies, where the present array of hereditary rulers will give way eventually to a younger generation. While, on the surface, this may seem a subtle and largely inconsequential shift, it is likely to have more fundamental and long-ranging implications. Younger members of ruling families, even among the inner circles, have been educated and socialised to think in less traditional terms and to exhibit a more pan-Arab outlook.

This trend is even more deeply inculcated in the younger and more educated sectors of the general population. The decades of the 1970s and the 1980s stand out in stark contrast to those of the 1950s and 1960s in the capability of Arab governments to exercise authority and control. This means that régimes are far less vulnerable to internal coups or external calamities (witness the tenacity of Saddam Husayn following the liberation of Kuwait). It also means that they display far greater ability to manipulate public expression into officially desired channels.

This demonstration of surface strength has not done anything, however, to ameliorate or reduce the ageless gulf between governments and people in this region. For quite good reasons, people have always been suspicious of governments, which traditionally acted to enhance their own power (e.g. by conscripting young men into the army and by extorting the maximum level of taxation from powerless subjects). Since the late 1940s and 1950s, when many Arab states formally gained their sovereignty and held out the promise of independent action, the intellectuals and the masses alike have been disappointed by the succession of governments which have consistently trumpeted the policies and ideologies of egalitarianism, economic reform, social justice, and political liberalism--but just as consistently have failed on their promises and become enmired in corruption and indifference. For historical and social reasons, this has been less true perhaps in the Gulf monarchies than elsewhere, but even there one can see increasing signs of impatience and agitation. The consequence is that governments resist reform and change, and therefore inexorably find themselves in confrontation with emerging reformist impulses (most recently from the Islamic party).

*Faultlines in the "New Order"*. Given the preceding ingredients, two principal faultlines can be discerned in the perceived new Arab/Western order as it applies to the Gulf. First, the GCC-Egyptian-Syrian alliance promises to be as fragile or transitory as earlier "pragmatic" or "tactical" alliances. The grand rhetoric about immutably integrating Egypt and Syria into a Gulf free-market economic orbit is resonant with past designs: the 1970s were full of talk about the promise of Gulf investment in the Arab breadbasket, Sudan, and of the Gulf role in the Egyptian *infitah* (including joint military industrialization schemes). Saudi-Egyptian relations are close now, but then they were similarly intimate before the Yemeni civil war and again before Camp David. The GCC wooing of Syria under an Asad/'Alawi/Ba'thist regime may be no more permanent than were GCC expectations that a closing of ranks with Saddam Husayn's Iraq would "tame" Baghdad's antipathy and cupidity.

On the other side of the coin, there is no choice but for Saudi Arabia and its fellow monarchies to rebuild relations with Jordan and Yemen. Without King Husayn, Jordan may well slide into chaos, fragmentation and an intolerable menace. Yemen, as is often noted, is the most

populous state in the Arabian Peninsula, and its people are probably the most dynamic and ambitious. While the Gulf states have good cause to be disappointed in the PLO, once again, it remains to be seen how Riyadh can promote an alternative viable Palestinian authority.

The second faultline lies in the potential divergence between solidifying GCC official relations with the West on the one hand, and tensions between those same GCC governments and their increasingly impatient citizenries on the other. Growing, even if necessarily muted, criticism of the autocratic tendencies, paternalistic manner, and corruption of GCC governments is by no means confined to the young and educated. The situation in Kuwait following its liberation reflects the tension between ruling families, intent on preserving the *status quo*, and restive populations, increasingly determined to accept nothing less than reform and a fair measure of constitutionalism and liberalism. The inability of the Al Sabah to satisfy widespread demands for reform and return of the National Assembly, or to curb the acts of revenge against accused collaborators with Iraq, does not speak well for the responsiveness of the system to changed circumstances.

To this may be added the widespread misgivings within the GCC of Saudi Arabia, such as its attempts to drive GCC policies in directions of its own self-interest (witness the GCC-EC negotiations over petrochemicals, from which Saudi Arabia stood primarily to benefit), or interference in others' domestic affairs (notably in pressuring against the reconstitution of National Assemblies in Kuwait and Bahrain). As a consequence, GCC solidarity may be far less evident than the impression given by regular meetings and frequent statements. Saudi Arabia typically argued most strongly for cooperation with the United States; Riyadh's position has been based always on keeping troops over-the-horizon, but at the same time permitting the presence of significant numbers of American soldiers and military-related civilians in in-country training and maintenance roles, as well as the "prepositioning" of military stocks at strategic locations within the kingdom. Kuwait until 1987 ran to the other end of the spectrum as the state most strenuously opposed to a Western presence.

Kuwait's subsequent *volte-face*, running from the reflagging of the tankers to its dependence on the West to regain its sovereignty, comprises a *rapprochement* fundamentally based on perceptions and the reality of extreme vulnerability. The potential for a reversal of policy remains, or, even more problematic, a shift in public opinion among Kuwaitis, particularly if the US is perceived as conniving at the Al Sabah penchant to continue on before, despite the increasing militancy of a solid political opposition and the indignation of those Kuwaitis who remained throughout the Iraqi occupation.

Washington, London, and other Western capitals tend to confine their relationships to the countries of the Gulf to their governments. As a consequence, they risk increasing alienation from and criticism by GCC populations, especially an emerging educated elite. There are many already who have become critical of the United States for its perceived anti-Palestinian policy. Nearly as large a segment complains that the United States does nothing to encourage liberalisation by ruling families. It is not hard to envisage a point at which disquiet becomes anger.

*Arab and Regional Orientations.* A foundation of foreign policy in the GCC states must necessarily rest on Arab ties and considerations. No matter how tortuous, these will remain predominant over Western connections, even if it dictates inconclusive middle-of-the-road policies in attempting to steer safely between competing Arab camps. The depth of the Gulf states' "Arabness" is a factor too often overlooked or unjustifiably discounted by Western policy analysts and journalists.

At the same time, GCC policies must take geopolitical determinants into account. Amongst other things, correct relations with more powerful and/or dangerous neighbours are a necessity. All six+ (0) (the Arabian/Persian Gulf. This entails accommodation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite the revolutionary rhetoric and hostile activities emanating from Tehran in the past. To be sure, this is a long-term process which may be showing its first fruits only in 1991 as the revolutionary fury wears down in the Islamic Republic. The resumption of diplomatic relations

between Riyadh and Tehran in March 1991 and the peaceful reappearance of Iranian pilgrims on the *hajj* in June give evidence of good progress in this arena. A similar *rapprochement* with Iraq is a long-term necessity. One wonders how long it will be before Saddam Husayn pays a visit to Riyadh?

At the same time, Saudi Arabia, the key to the GCC, has a second face on the opposite side of the Gulf: there it looks towards the northern Arab axis, as well as towards Yemen (trans-Red Sea concerns can largely be discounted except for concern over the chokepoints at either ingress). One might expect accommodation with Israel, even if only tacitly (as has happened in the case of Israeli overflights of Saudi territory), except that the pan-Arab factor in Riyadh's worldview dictates that the pursuit of Arab solidarity, even in the post-war era, must take precedence. Since the age of republics (and even before that), Saudi relations with its Yemeni neighbors have been marked by fitful common cause with the north and acrimony with the south. Nevertheless, the new Republic of Yemen cannot be ignored and a prime lesson of the 1960s was that it was far better to be on good terms and work with Yemen than to allow hostile influences to threaten the kingdom directly. With the passage of time, the expulsion of Yemeni workers from Saudi Arabia and a moratorium on financial assistance will look increasingly like an act of pique rather than a realistic alteration of policy.

... *c'est la même chose*. It took only a few months after the *dénouement* of the war for the forces of conservatism to regain control. Once again, emphasis returned to preservation of the *status quo*, a tried-and-true strategy that has served well the traditionalist monarchs of the Gulf through a multitude of threatening crises: the bloody destruction of the monarchy in Iraq, Nasir's establishment of a springboard to Arabia in Yemen, the introduction of a Marxist state in Aden, British withdrawal from the Gulf and Iranian capture of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, the demise of the Shah's regime, the devastating war between Iraq and Iran, and, finally, the first outright aggression against one of the monarchical six and the prompt reversal of this misfortune. Through it all, the Gulf states have survived--not by reshaping their basic constitutions in response to every provocation, but by clinging to old principles and old alliances. Why change now?