

# Chapter 1

## Saudi conceptions of national and Gulf security

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Western and GCC governments share the view that the essence of Gulf security is protecting oil – its production, transport and sale at a stable and reasonable price. This has been the cornerstone of Western and American policy-making since the Carter Doctrine and before. Just as importantly, even as Gulf oil is the lifeblood of the industrialised world, so oil revenues are the principal source of income for Gulf governments and the mainstay of their economic health.

But how can this objective be successfully achieved in what often seems to be an especially hostile environment? And, more to the point, how can this primary objective be squared with the strategy of containing Iraq and Iran that the West has pursued in the Gulf for the past decade? It should not be surprising that the views of Western governments and Gulf regimes on optimal Gulf security differ, particularly over the details, or that, on occasion, these differences may lead to friction, despite agreement on broad objectives.

Western conceptions of Gulf security have evolved into a primary objective of ‘Gulf defence’: the military capability to defend regional interests and friendly states. But, as American and other Western states increased their power projection in the region, the emphasis shifted from confronting a Soviet threat to facing regional threats to Western interests. By the 1990s the perceived threats had narrowed down to Iraq and Iran, and the Clinton administration’s Gulf policy was articulated as ‘dual containment’. The second Bush administration retained the same policy, characterising these two states (along with North Korea) as an ‘axis of evil’. The short-term

purpose of containment seemed to be to minimise the damage that both states could cause to Western interests and Western clients. In the longer term, containment seemed to be intended to force change in regime policies, and even in regimes themselves. In particular, after the American military victory in Afghanistan, the Bush administration's frustration with Saddam Hussein's continued rule in Baghdad provoked more bellicose calls for 'regime change' in Iraq.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies are at once the objects of Western protection and partners in the Western scheme of Gulf security. However, they have a decidedly secondary status in the partnership, and generally are expected to do little more than accept, approve and implement Western ideas and actions. Since both parties have separate agendas, which sometimes conflict, it is not surprising that this partnership periodically comes under serious strain. If it is to remain strong and viable, then a core aspect of the partnership must be that it should accommodate Saudi Arabia's perceptions of its security requirements.

Saudi security perceptions include many geopolitical constants, but they have not been immutable; they have reflected changes in political circumstances over the past several decades. For example, during the 1980s Iran and the Soviet Union constituted perhaps the most serious threats to Saudi security, while Iraq was a bulwark that deserved support against the menace of the Islamic republic. A decade later the Soviet threat, the driving force behind so much of Western planning for Gulf security, disappeared and had been replaced by the Iraqi threat, which has assumed similar ominous proportions in Western eyes; meanwhile, Riyadh has pursued a successful rapprochement with Tehran. For all that, though, divergence of opinion between the Gulf states and the West over Israel's role in the region continues unabated, and, since the outbreak of the second *intifada* or Palestinian unrest in late 2000, it has become even sharper.

The difficulty of Saudi Arabia's position is that it appears to be surrounded by real or potential enemies, most of whom are bigger and more powerful. Thus the Kingdom must tread warily with its neighbours, using all its skills of diplomacy and consensus-building, while forging strong alliances with dependable powers. The country has dealt with the perceived multitude of threats by creating armed forces to protect its oilfields and territory. But, given

the limitations on its military power, even greater emphasis has been placed on a foreign policy that includes financial inducements and moral weight, along with close coordination and alliance with the Arab and Islamic world, the GCC and the West. The following pages outline Riyadh's perceived external threats and then discuss the Kingdom's strategies for dealing with them.

## **Saudi security horizons: regional threat assessments**

### **Iran**

Iran has always been a source of worry to the Saudi state. In part, this is because of ancient Arab–Persian suspicions in the Gulf, compounded by Wahabi views of Iran's Shiite faith. While relations were correct during the reign of Shah Muhammad Reza Shah, and the two countries served as the foundations of the United States' twin-pillar strategy, age-old suspicions remained.

The Iranian Revolution of 1978–9 disrupted relations tremendously and ushered in a long period of animosity. During the 1980s low points in the relationship were reached with the Saudi shooting down of an Iranian F-4 combat aircraft in 1984, Iranian attacks on Saudi shipping during the 'tanker war' aspect of the latter stages of the Iran–Iraq War, the Iranian demonstration during the 1987 *haj* (Islamic pilgrimage) that left hundreds dead, and bombs set off by Iranian agents during the 1989 *haj*. But through the 1990s relations gradually improved. Crown Prince Abdullah met Iranian President Muhammad Khatami during the 1997 Organisation of Islamic Conference summit in Tehran; former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited the Kingdom early the following year; and Khatami went to Saudi Arabia in 1999. More significantly, the two countries began discussing a security pact in early 2000, and in April 2001 Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz became the first Saudi Interior Minister to visit Iran since the revolution, when he travelled to Tehran to sign the agreement – described as an instrument for cooperation in the joint surveillance of borders and in combating organised crime, terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration.

Events in Iran, and the republic's activities outside its borders, have preoccupied Saudi leaders for more than two decades. Only in the last few years have they concluded that stability seems to exist in Iran and recognised that there is no alternative to the present system. They have improved relations with Tehran because they see realistic

possibilities for removing Iranian antipathy to Saudi Arabia and its place in the world, thereby ending both Iran's support for terrorism as a way to subvert the Kingdom and its efforts to foment trouble amongst the Saudi Shiite minority, and moderating the Iranian drive for leadership of the Islamic world.

The Saudi leaders believe that Iran is going through a natural evolution as a state. As it evolves, it becomes easier to deal with on key issues, in part because it is easier to deal with President Khatami – to speak frankly and to reach agreement with him. They believe that Khatami is a genuine reformer, with a broader, more realistic world view than previous Iranian presidents, and that he recognises that Iran must change its ways and reach a *modus vivendi* with its neighbours and world powers in order to survive and grow. They are also encouraged by the improvement in Iran's relations with Bahrain and Kuwait in recent years, although continued Iranian occupation of the Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs continues to cause problems with the United Arab Emirates, and thus with the GCC.

There are still serious reasons for Riyadh to worry, however. First, there is the question of Khatami's position in Iran's politics: even after his re-election by an overwhelming margin in June 2001, the likelihood of his forcing the conservatives to retreat, or even of simply holding his ground, seem very slim. In addition, Saudi Arabia remains very concerned with Iran's military potential, particularly its acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Official assurances from Tehran that Iran is not building a nuclear bomb are not believed in Riyadh, in part because it continues to see the regime as inherently antagonistic and in part because Tehran clearly believes that it is being targeted and impinged upon by the great powers.

### **Iraq**

For nearly half a century Saudi Arabia has viewed Iraq with suspicion. For several decades after the 1958 Iraqi revolution, the Kingdom – like its fellow monarchies – was an Iraqi target, as shown by Baghdad's support for sabotage and opposition fronts. Riyadh's alliance with Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88 came about not so much because common interests had emerged as because Saudi Arabia feared the intentions of the revolutionary regime in Iran more than those of Iraq.

The underlying Saudi suspicions of Saddam Hussein's true character and intentions were abruptly revived in August 1990, with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This, of course, drew the Kingdom even closer to the United States, because of the new requirements for protection against what had become a very real Iraqi threat. The Kingdom contributed to the war to free Kuwait by providing access facilities for coalition forces on Saudi territory, by contributing to and providing the overall leadership for Arab elements of those coalition forces, and by organising Arab and Islamic support for the cause. After Kuwait's liberation, Riyadh supported all UN resolutions on Iraq, including the sanctions regime and no-fly zones. Its support for the last, in particular, was crucial because of the basing of American, British and – for a time – French aircraft on Saudi soil. However, this support became troublesome for Saudi Arabia because of the widespread criticism and even condemnation that it attracted, particularly after the sanctions regime entered its second decade without any realistic prospect of the underlying problem being resolved.

How do the Saudis view Iraq now and in the future? First, as a close neighbour, Iraq is regarded as intrinsically of great interest, for the two countries are linked by common ethnic, historical and religious backgrounds. Riyadh desperately wishes to see an end to the negative developments since the liberation of Kuwait, but realises that, by itself, it has little power to affect events.

While acknowledging that the United States has taken the lead in confronting Iraq, Saudi Arabia insists that certain ground rules apply:

1. Iraq must remain united in territory and geography;
2. It must become a stable and sound neighbour in the area and contribute to security and stability;
3. Only the people of Iraq can decide their own future – there should be no imposition from the outside; and
4. Saudi Arabia cannot deal with Saddam Hussein, since he betrayed both Saudi trust and its values.

Riyadh maintains that the Kingdom will not interfere in Iraq, though it agrees that the sooner Saddam Hussein is removed, the sooner stability will be restored. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is not convinced

that Iraq's WMD capability has been destroyed and, as a neighbour and potential target, it insists upon a means of identifying and controlling such capability. There is evidence of some frustration with American policy. The policy of dual containment, it is thought, gave the initiative to Saddam, and he has exploited humanitarian concerns over the effects of the embargo on the Iraqi people.

Riyadh supports any measure to alleviate suffering of the Iraqi people, but at the same time believes that Saddam's emphasis on the plight of his people means that he does not want the embargo to be removed – it provides him with external support and keeps his own people hostage to the West and thus dependent on him. Saddam has also cleverly exploited the continued coalition bombing of Iraq and the second *intifada* as ammunition to be used against the West – and thus against the Kingdom, because of its close cooperation with the West.

The big question is, how long Saddam will stay in power? Having ruled out its own intervention to overthrow him, Saudi Arabia seems to pin its hopes on natural death or a successful coup.<sup>1</sup> In its eyes, Saddam's eldest son Uday is little different from his father, uncontrolled and impulsive, and the Saudi stance towards Iraq would remain unchanged if Uday took over. On the other hand, the Saudis seem more amenable to working with the younger son Qusay if necessary, regarding him as more stable and reliable.

### **Pakistan**

Saudi Arabia has enjoyed close ties with Pakistan since the latter's creation in 1947. Pakistan is strategically important to the Kingdom for a number of reasons. First, it has one of the largest populations of all Islamic countries. Second, thousands of Pakistanis live and work in the Kingdom. Third, its Makran coast sits at the entrance to the Gulf, not far from the Strait of Hormuz. Fourth, in addition to providing military assistance to the Kingdom (especially in seconding skilled personnel for the Saudi navy and air force), Pakistan is regarded as one of the bulwarks of Islam against its worldwide enemies. The potential role of Pakistan's nuclear capability as an 'Islamic bomb' has generated considerable speculation, and it has been conjectured that Riyadh sees the Pakistani nuclear arsenal as a useful counter to Iran's aspirations in the same direction.<sup>2</sup>

Another factor in the close relationship is the personal ties between the Al Saud and various Pakistani leaders.<sup>3</sup> Pakistani Prime

Minister Nawaz Sharif publicly admitted that in 1998, after India had exploded its nuclear devices and before Pakistan responded, he had consulted the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and Crown Prince Abdullah made a high-profile visit to Pakistan a few months later to emphasise Saudi moral and financial support.<sup>4</sup> After General Pervez Musharraf seized power in 1999, his first trip abroad was to the Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> The Saudis subsequently lobbied Musharraf to commute the death sentence levied on his predecessor Nawaz Sharif and agreed to give the exiled Sharif and his family refuge in the Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, however, Pakistan is a source of potential problems. In part, this stems from its inclination towards internal fragmentation due to its four independent-minded provinces, serious Sunni–Shiite differences, the alienation of the *Mohajirs* (Muslims originally from India), especially in Karachi, corrupt civilian politics, and the repeated imposition of military rule. For the Kingdom the collapse, virtually next door, of one of the Islamic world's largest and most important states would have serious spill-over implications.

There are also troubling hiccups in the bilateral relationship, although they have not been big enough to shake its foundations. News reports in the mid-1980s spoke of 10,000–16,000 Pakistani soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia, including a tank brigade at Tabuk in the north-west corner of the country. The ostensible purpose of the tanks was to provide defence against Israel, but Pakistan's refusal to allow the troops to be transferred to Saudi Arabia's front-line defences against Iran, particularly after the June 1987 *haj* riots, supposedly resulted in Riyadh terminating the contractual arrangements for the use of the troops, and they were sent home. It was also alleged that Pakistan refused a Saudi demand that the Shiite element of the Pakistani troops (said to be 10–15% of the total) be sent home. Riyadh, however, insisted that the Pakistani troops were being sent home because their contractual term had expired and there was no more need for them.<sup>7</sup> Shortly afterwards, relations were momentarily jarred when the Saudis arrested a number of Pakistani (and other) Shiite activists during the 1988 *haj*.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Islamabad's rocky relations with its immediate neighbours raise the potential for conflict in the vicinity of Saudi Arabia. Pakistani relations with Iran have been troubled by persistent Sunni–Shiite violence – with radical Sunni groups assassinating Shiite targets in Pakistan, and Iran allegedly sponsoring retaliation against

Sunni figures there. The Pakistani military, particularly through its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, was a principal actor in the formation and training of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. (Until the American intervention in Afghanistan, there were abundant allegations of continued ISI connections with the Taliban – and even, through the Taliban, with Islamic radicals in Central Asia). These ISI activities have been of direct concern to Saudi Arabia because of the Kingdom's ambivalent relationship with the Taliban and Riyadh's concern over certain aspects of Islamic radicalisation in Central Asia.

And, in the other direction, Pakistani–Indian relations have been a flashpoint for over 50 years. India's detonation of its first atomic device in 1998, shortly followed by a similar test by Pakistan, threatened to raise the stakes in another war between the two states, but fortunately the disaster was averted. Equally vexatious is the issue of Kashmir, with the Pakistani military accused of actively supporting Kashmiri separatists in violent anti-Indian activities.<sup>9</sup> The Saudis support Pakistan on the question of Kashmir and back UN resolutions on the region because they feel the situation is very similar to that of Palestine, but, similarly, they realise that a peaceful resolution in Kashmir is unlikely for the foreseeable future.

### **Afghanistan**

Even more than the West, Saudi Arabia was dismayed by the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. While it fully shared the West's anti-Communist objections to the puppet government, it carried the additional concern of seeking an appropriate response to an attack upon the Islamic world. The Saudis supported Afghani resistance groups financially<sup>10</sup> and sought to create a moderate coalition to serve as a government-in-exile. In addition, thousands of Saudis went to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet occupation.<sup>11</sup> Along with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia brokered the reconciliation agreement signed in Mecca between the leading factions in 1993.<sup>12</sup>

When that agreement failed, and the Taliban extended their control, Saudi Arabia provided important financial support to the Taliban. It was, with Pakistan and the UAE, one of the only three countries to recognise the Taliban as rulers of Afghanistan. But relations with the movement soon soured.<sup>13</sup> In large part, this appeared to be due to the granting of asylum to Osama bin Laden in

Afghanistan in 1996. Bin Laden's contribution to the struggle against the Russians had been welcomed both in Afghanistan and by the Saudi government. However, as the extreme radicalism of his views became clear, an embarrassed Riyadh revoked his citizenship and eventually downgraded its diplomatic presence in Kabul in 1998, in protest at the Taliban's extreme interpretation of Islam and particularly their refusal to hand over bin Laden.<sup>14</sup> The Saudis, however, continued to support mediation between the Taliban and their Afghan opponents, hosting talks in the Kingdom in 2000.<sup>15</sup> In the end, it was clear that the Kingdom had overestimated its influence on the Taliban and underestimated bin Laden's impact. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal remarked 'The stability of Afghanistan seemed a bigger concern than the presence of bin Laden. When the Taliban received him, they indicated he would be absolutely prevented from taking any actions. We had unequivocal promises.'<sup>16</sup>

Although the Saudis were particularly embarrassed by Osama bin Laden's apparent orchestration of the attacks of 11 September, and the Saudi government quickly stated its approval of American actions against bin Laden, it viewed the invasion of Afghanistan with disquiet.<sup>17</sup> Riyadh may have regarded the dénouement of the war with some relief, provided American anti-terrorist activity did not continue against other Islamic countries, but it certainly could not have viewed a new Afghan government dominated by the Northern Alliance with equanimity. Additional embarrassment resulted from the fact that Saudi citizens were involved in the 11 September attacks and were among the members of al-Qaeda captured in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, interim Afghan President Hamid Karzai made Saudi Arabia the destination of his first official visit and received an initial pledge of \$20m in urgent aid, with a further commitment of \$200m made at the January donors' meeting in Tokyo.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Northern Arab States**

These states no longer pose the sort of threat they did a few decades ago, when Nasserist Egypt and Ba'athist Syria and Iraq demanded and schemed for the overthrow of the Al Saud and other monarchical systems in the region. Saudi Arabia has proved as durable as its erstwhile adversaries, if not more so. Still, even if it is no longer faces an ideological threat from this quarter, it remains on

guard against the resentment expressed by poorer populations, many of whom work in Saudi Arabia.

Indirectly, relations with northern Arab states pose the potential hazard of divergence on pan-Arab issues – such as relations with the United States – which has implications for Saudi Arabia's leadership role within the Arab world. The Kingdom has indisputably sought to play an active and influential role in Arab councils. The desire to present an Arab point of view was perhaps a primary motivation for King Abd al-Aziz's meeting with President Roosevelt during the Second World War. However, given its relatively small population, modest industrial base and limited military power, the status Saudi Arabia enjoys in inter-Arab councils depends on financial largesse, moral reputation and leverage with the United States.

With the ending of the Arab Cold War in the late 1960s, Saudi stock rose in the Arab world, particularly as its conduct of foreign policy grew more sophisticated. Still, many of the determinants of Riyadh's Arab policies have been weakened in recent years. The decline in nominal oil prices in the last decade – compounded by their declining value in real terms to a level lower than the price in 1974 – combines with growing domestic demands on the Saudi budget to limit the amount of largesse available. (In addition, the Kingdom's disbursements bring a rather poor return in influence, because of the Saudi custom of handing out monies with insufficient controls over their use.) Furthermore, the Kingdom's moral claim, based on its role as protector of Islam's holiest sites, has come under increasing attack by Islamic radicals. Finally, the 'special relationship' Saudi Arabia enjoys with the United States is seen by many more as a liability than an asset.

On almost any issue, the Arab world is no closer to joint action than it was at the founding of the Arab League over 50 years ago. Therefore, the scope for pan-Arab political cooperation remains minimal, as does Saudi Arabia's role in such an arena. And if political cooperation is minimal at best, then it stands to reason that military cooperation is even less likely. Moreover, while Riyadh sees political cooperation as a desirable goal, it has strong reservations about closer military ties. Token Saudi troops have served on the Arab-Israeli front, but the closest the Kingdom has come to significant military cooperation occurred when Egyptian and Syrian troops were dispatched to fight with coalition forces – alongside

GCC forces and under the nominal command of a Saudi general – during the Kuwait War. But those troops returned home after the hostilities ended, and it seems that this alliance was only a short-term tactical response; the pursuit of a more robust and permanent partnership does not seem feasible in the foreseeable future.<sup>19</sup> The threats to Saudi security from the northern Arab direction, insofar as they exist, are indirect and related to its standing within the Arab world and its relationship with the United States.

### **Israel, Palestine and Arab–Israeli conflict**

Although small numbers of Saudi troops have been stationed along the borders with Israel and took part in some of the Arab–Israeli Wars, the Kingdom has never been an Arab front-line state. There has never been direct confrontation with Israel, although such confrontation could have arisen out of incidental contact. Israel occupied several Saudi islands in the Gulf of Aqaba during the 1956 War and again during the 1967 War, returning them to Egyptian control (the *status quo ante*) in connexion with its withdrawal from Sinai in 1982. In addition, Israeli aircraft are said to have overflowed Saudi airspace on a number of occasions.

The possibility of direct Israeli attack or sabotage is unlikely, given Saudi Arabia's history of non-confrontation and the limited military threat that it poses. Still, Israel's WMD capabilities may play a part in Saudi strategic perceptions, particularly at a time when Israel's relations with its Arab neighbours are worsening. At the same time, Israel and its supporters regard Saudi Arabia as a serious threat, particularly because of its ties to the United States, and actively work to undermine its position and relationship with Washington.

Saudi–Palestinian relations are chronically troubled. The Kingdom has always been doubtful (even fearful) of Palestinian radicalism, whether embodied by ideologically leftist groups or, more recently, by Islamic entities such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad. While wholeheartedly supporting the principles of the Palestinian cause, Saudi leadership in the past has been suspicious of Yasser Arafat and his intentions and motivations (Palestinian–Saudi relations suffered as a result of the Palestinian support for Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait). Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia continues to lobby the international community and the United States on behalf of the Palestinian cause. It makes regular subventions to the Palestine

Liberation Organisation/Palestinian Authority and helped to create the two special funds set up at an Arab summit after the outbreak of the second *intifada* in October 2000, pledging to provide \$250m of the \$1bn total.<sup>20</sup>

### **Yemen and the Horn of Africa**

Yemen has been a source of worry to the Saudis since the Yemeni Revolution of 1962.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of a Nasserist republic on the Saudis' doorstep was unnerving, even without the presence of up to 50,000 Egyptian troops and the scattered incidents of Egyptian bombing of Saudi territory during the civil war in Yemen (1962–67). In the end, the Saudis were obliged to acquiesce in the status of the Yemen Arab Republic, albeit without the Egyptian military presence, in part because of the emergence of an even more radical state in newly independent South Yemen. Between 1967 and 1990 Saudi policy was uncertainly balanced between cautiously supporting the moderate regimes in North Yemen (while often working behind the scenes to ensure that they remained weak and divided) and attempting to contain the Marxist regime in South Yemen. The destructive effect of infighting within Aden's leadership and the impact of the Soviet Union's collapse led South Yemen to offer to merge with North Yemen in 1990. Saudi concern was redoubled over the implications of a larger, more powerful and unified state, and Riyadh gave tacit support to the southern secessionists during the 1994 civil war between the two parts of the country.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen continue to be patchy for the same underlying reasons, although many outstanding differences have been settled. Because the Yemen government refused to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, up to one million Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia were expelled. The additional burden to Yemen of these workers combined with a drastic shortfall in foreign economic assistance to create enormous hardship for the country, which Saudi Arabia has only gradually and partially helped to ameliorate. A welcome development was resolution of the border dispute between the two countries in 1995. With Yemeni acceptance at long last of permanent Saudi sovereignty in the provinces over which it took control in 1934, the way was open to completing tortuous negotiations over the demarcation of the common border as defined in a treaty of 2000.

Although it is highly unlikely that Yemen would launch an unprovoked attack against its larger neighbour, the Kingdom remains concerned about the potential for internal fragmentation in Yemen, due to its poverty, the narrowness of its president's ruling base, the independent and armed nature of the tribes, and the presence in Yemen of Islamic extremists because of the regime's weakness.

Similar fears of instability and violence spilling over from the Horn of Africa are also among Saudi concerns. Although the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has ground to a halt, the situation is not permanently settled. Furthermore, the fragmentation of and disarray in Somalia invites outside intervention in ways that may be antithetical to Saudi interests. The Kingdom is also concerned about the future of Sudan, both in terms of the stability of the regime in Khartoum and in the ramifications of the 30-year civil war between the Arab Muslim north and the Christian south.

### **Relations with GCC neighbours**

For nearly two centuries before the formal establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the Al Saud marshalled their political and military resources to impose the Wahabi view of Islamic purification on as much of the Arabian Peninsula as they could, and occasionally beyond it.

Not surprisingly, this left a legacy of subconscious suspicion in the minds of most neighbours. Saudi incursions in the nineteenth century spread through most of what is now the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and deep into Oman. A lingering consequence was the crisis of 1952–5 when Saudi forces occupied the Buraimi oasis, claimed before and since by Abu Dhabi (one of the constituent members of the UAE) and Oman.<sup>22</sup> Poor relations with Kuwait resulted in a Saudi economic blockade early in the twentieth century, and the Kingdom took over much Kuwaiti-claimed territory through a 1922 treaty. The creation of British mandates for Jordan and Iraq prevented Saudi expansion to the north, and the British-protected status of the smaller Gulf states also insulated them against Saudi designs.

In some ways, therefore, it took extraordinary circumstances to bring Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours together in the GCC. The first undoubtedly was the climate of aggressive Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. The second was the full independence of the Gulf states, beginning with Kuwait in 1961 and

culminating with British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971. The third was the Iranian Revolution in 1979, followed shortly by the eruption of the Iran–Iraq War. Not only did these latter events stoke the urgency that lay behind the creation of the GCC in February 1981, they also created the practical circumstances in which it was possible for the organisation to be created – by removing Iran and, especially, Iraq from consideration.

The consequence was a grouping of like-minded countries that sought to build closer integration in the economic and political arenas, as well as in regional security. In fact, the rhetoric and modest accomplishments of the first few years tended to ignore the question of security. The establishment of the Peninsula Shield Force at the Saudi base at Hafar al-Batin (in the north-east corner of the Kingdom) was meant as the forerunner of a more unified GCC response to Gulf security, but was never actually more than symbolic. Although rhetoric and regular joint and multilateral exercises extolled the virtues of military integration, very few real efforts were made. Most defensive preparations were made by individual countries through bilateral arms purchases and cooperative agreements with outside powers, chiefly the United States and Britain.

A principal reason for the failure of the GCC to integrate more in most spheres – not just regional security and military matters – lies in the inherent imbalance between Saudi Arabia and its five much smaller allies. The Kingdom estimates its population at more than 22m, while the total population of the other five combined is not likely to be more than 9m. The Saudi GDP of \$185bn (in 2000) far outstrips the others' cumulative total of \$128bn.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the historic fear of Saudi expansionism blends with present concerns about becoming submerged in a larger Saudi economy.

Such concerns and suspicions on the part of the smaller five are mirrored in the military sphere. Active Saudi Arabian armed forces personnel total about 126,500 (over 200,000 when active National Guard personnel are included), as against 147,000 for all the rest of the GCC, and estimated defence expenditures during 1999 were \$18.7bn for Saudi Arabia and slightly over \$10bn for the rest of the GCC.<sup>24</sup> The headquarters for the GCC is located in Riyadh, and the Assistant Secretary-General for Defence Affairs has always been a Saudi. Thus, while the Kingdom has viewed a joint GCC defence force with some enthusiasm, other GCC states have been reluctant to go along, for

fear the force would be Saudi-dominated and Saudi-subservient. Similarly, some member states have accepted GCC-wide internal security agreements only grudgingly, bearing in mind instances of Saudi pressure on its neighbours to rein in and arrest citizens for actions or writings that Riyadh considered inflammatory.

### **Oil security and defence**

Saudi Arabia's primary concern must be the protection of its oilfields, if not the lines of communication once the oil leaves the Kingdom. Protection of the oilfields, pipelines and terminals against sabotage and other internal disruption is relatively easy to achieve, and this is the responsibility of the National Guard, in support of Saudi ARAMCO oil company preparations. The oilfields and the pipelines are mostly located in uninhabited areas and are easily monitorable in desert conditions. The principal terminal is at Ras Tanura and is heavily guarded. Once crude oil is loaded onto tankers, however, Saudi defensive capabilities quickly diminish, and protecting the lines of communication becomes an international responsibility (just as ownership of most of the crude is no longer Saudi).

Saudi Arabia is a large country of about 2.2m square kilometres (by comparison, the United Kingdom is 243,500km<sup>2</sup>, France 547,000km<sup>2</sup>, Pakistan 803,900km<sup>2</sup>, Iran 1.6m km<sup>2</sup> and the United States 9.6m km<sup>2</sup>), much of it uninhabited or lightly inhabited desert. The Kingdom's oil facilities are concentrated in the Eastern Province, along the Gulf, which comprises one of three principal areas of defensive priority for the country. Besides containing the Kingdom's oil, the Eastern Province also encompasses the new urban conglomeration of Dammam/Dhahran, the traditional agricultural oases of al-Hasa and al-Qatif, and the industrial city of Jubayl.

The other two areas of high defence priority are the capital at Riyadh (the Kingdom's largest city) and the urban centres of al-Hijaz province, including the commercial hub of Jeddah, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and the city of Taif. These three areas, stretching across the Kingdom in an east-west band, are the focal point of Saudi defence arrangements. The distances between cities and military bases poses major challenges. Riyadh is 390km from Dammam on the Gulf and 950km from Jeddah on the Red Sea, and the distance from the southernmost city of Jizan to the northern provincial capital of Arar is nearly 2,250km.

Not surprisingly, the oldest components of the Saudi armed forces are the land forces. But as threats to the Kingdom evolved and became more sophisticated, the Kingdom's defensive priorities moved to the air force and air defence. The principal elements in the Saudi military structure are outlined below.

Formally, the High Defence Council determines policy, although in practice the King's decisions are final. The council was established in 1961, with membership consisting of the King, the Ministers of Defence and Aviation, Finance and National Economy, Communications, and Foreign Affairs, and the Chief-of-Staff. The Minister of Defence and Aviation (since 1962 the office has been occupied by Prince Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz, regarded as second in line for the throne) controls the army, air force and navy, while the National Guard (commanded by the Heir Apparent) theoretically falls under the control of the Minister of the Interior, along with the Frontier Force, the Coast Guard and internal security forces. In practice, however, the National Guard is answerable only to Crown Prince Abdullah.<sup>25</sup>

### **Royal Saudi Air Force**

The air force has held pride of place in the Kingdom's military modernisation, in large part because the Kingdom's geography means that most attacks would have to be launched by air across the Red Sea, the Gulf or the northern and southern deserts. The distance from the northern and southern borders to the Kingdom's centres of population, industry and oilfields also provides strategic defence. The development of the air force has relied most on American assistance, beginning with the provision of fighters in the 1950s and transport aircraft in the 1960s. But, even though the relationship continued with high-profile purchases of F-5 and F-15 combat aircraft and AWACS radar aircraft in the 1970s and early 1980s, the political problems of getting F-14 and F-16 purchases through a pro-Israeli US Congress forced the Saudis to turn to Britain for *Tornado* aircraft. The air force remains the most professional and prestigious of the Saudi services.

### **Royal Saudi Land Forces**

The army is the largest force, with some 75,000 personnel organised into nine brigades: three armoured, five mechanised and one

airborne. Tank capabilities include 350 M-1A2 *Abrams* and 450 M-60A3s; the 290 AMX-30s are being relegated to storage. The army also employs large numbers of armoured personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, self-propelled and towed artillery and a number of attack and support helicopters. Although it has heavier equipment than the National Guard, the army is said to lack manpower and leadership, and is organised to fight more from the military cities it utilises than to conduct rapid deployments.<sup>26</sup>

### **Royal Saudi Navy**

This was one of the last of the armed forces to emerge, being formed as an adjunct of the army in 1957 and functioning as a separate force only from 1969. Over-ambitious programmes for its expansion were scaled back on several occasions, and it remains hampered by a lack of qualified manpower and a division of sources of equipment, training and concepts between the United States and France. With 15,500 personnel, including 3,000 marines, the navy boasts eight frigates and a number of missile and patrol craft, and operates out of bases on both the Red Sea and the Gulf.<sup>27</sup>

### **Royal Saudi Air Defence Forces**

Air defence units were detached from the army in 1984 to form a fourth service under the initial command of Prince Khalid bin Sultan, son of the Minister of Defence and Aviation and the commander of Arab forces during the Kuwait War. Air defence forces number 16,000 men with 33 SAM batteries, 73 *Shahine/Crotale* missile fire units and Chinese ballistic missiles. The units are positioned to guard the country's main cities, industrial centres, air bases and oilfields and facilities.<sup>28</sup>

### **National Guard**

The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) originated as a tribal force providing armed might during King Abd al-Aziz's reconstitution of the Saudi state early in the twentieth century. For many years the SANG was little more than a weak imitation of the army, receiving far fewer resources than other security forces and constituting a means for distributing income to loyal tribes. But a modernisation programme was initiated in 1972, with American assistance, to help the SANG accomplish its mission of maintaining

internal security (as distinct from the army's mission of defending the country from external threats). About 75% of its total listed personnel of 100,000 are active, uniformed guardsmen, and professionalism and capabilities have increased markedly in recent years. Equipment consists largely of wheeled armoured infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers, as well as some towed artillery. While the SANG's principal tasks include oil installation defence, counter-terrorism and handling civil disturbances, it is focusing increasingly on combat capabilities, including support for the army in hostile situations.<sup>29</sup>

### **Ministry of Interior**

The Ministry of the Interior is the largest employer in the Saudi government with more than 500,000 employees, of whom some 160,000 are said to be directly employed in security.<sup>30</sup> Such paramilitary forces as the Frontier Force (10,500 personnel), the Coast Guard (4,500), the Public Security Police (20,000) and the Special Security Force (500) come under its control.<sup>31</sup>

### **Saudi foreign policy**

There are serious inherent limitations to Saudi foreign policy. The country has a relatively small population and a proportionately small and weak military establishment. Therefore, the real strength of Saudi foreign policy has been in the traits of continuity, patience and persistence.

The Kingdom generally seeks to conduct its foreign policy and address its security concerns behind closed doors. It attempts to achieve an understanding, if not consensus, on disputes in much the same way that domestic politics are conducted. Relations with potentially threatening neighbours and other threats larger than Saudi defence capabilities are generally marked by subdued responses, hidden diplomacy and reliance on trustworthy allies for protection. Because of its small size, the Kingdom makes the most of such limited resources as financial rewards and moral suasion in its capacity as 'protector of the holy places'. Saudi relations with smaller neighbours, however, display a history of paradoxical behaviour, like that of a protective big brother who from time to time creates crises by insisting on having his own way on issues large and small.

### **Moral persuasion**

This tool has obvious limitations. Riyadh may well seek to project an ethical voice in the Arab arena, but relying on such a strategy has many disadvantages. From a broader point of view, assuming an Islamic mantle may permit Saudi Arabia to exercise some degree of moral leadership in the Islamic arena, but it is a double-edged sword, leaving the Kingdom open to charges of hypocrisy for the ostentatiousness of its ruling family and to attacks on its harsh interpretation of Islam and its treatment of women and expatriate workers. Despite being a self-proclaimed Islamic state, the Kingdom is vulnerable to being outflanked in terms of Islamic conservatism by revisionist Muslim regimes and groups – inside the country as well as outside.

By and large, Saudi Arabia has been more willing to maintain or open relations with unfriendly powers than the reverse. It established diplomatic ties with Beijing in 1990, even though it has always been staunchly anti-communist and had decried Chinese backing for Marxist South Yemen and Omani rebels. The Chinese connexion has proved useful already, albeit in a roundabout way, when the Kingdom purchased several dozen DF-3 *East Wind* ballistic missiles adapted for conventional warheads, and thereby provoked a spat with the United States. Similarly, the Kingdom opened channels with Moscow well before the demise of the Soviet Union. The first tentative steps towards renewal of a lapsed relationship<sup>32</sup> were taken in the mid-1980s, driven partly by Saudi desire to persuade Moscow to exert its influence to moderate Iran's activities in the Iran–Iraq War. Full relations were not established until September 1990, despite Riyadh's misgivings about the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan.

Such moves may have helped bring Iraq and South Yemen back into the mainstream of Gulf acceptability during the 1980s. Riyadh's purchase of the Chinese missiles may have been intended, at least in part, to demonstrate independence of action *vis-à-vis* the US. Although careful not to break Arab ranks on Israel, Riyadh has hosted delegations of prominent American Jews in efforts to explain its position on Arab–Israeli matters and to defuse criticism of its domestic affairs.

### **Financial assistance**

Monetary inducements can persuade but they are not very reliable deterrents (the payment of millions of dollars in war loans to Iraq

during the 1980s did not protect either Kuwait or Saudi Arabia in 1990). Since the beginning of its oil era, and especially since the oil price revolution of 1973–74, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a multi-faceted programme of aid and disbursement. Between 1975 and 1987 the \$48bn the Kingdom gave to developing countries (second only to the United States' aid contributions) averaged 4.2% of its GNP.<sup>33</sup>

In part, financial assistance has been routinised and channelled through established institutions, some of them multilateral bodies, such as the World Bank and the UN Development Organisation. The Saudi government has also worked through regional institutions, notably the Islamic Development Bank, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the OPEC Fund for International Development and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Bilateral financial relationships have been conducted on an *ad hoc* basis, through programmes administered by the Saudi Development Fund and by initiating regular programmes of payments, such as the already mentioned subventions to the Palestine Liberation Organisation and subsequently the Palestinian Authority.

### **The Islamic dimension**

Saudi Arabia sees itself as having special responsibilities in the worldwide Islamic community. This attitude derives from two sources. The first is the eighteenth-century alliance between the Al Saud and religious reformer Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, and the historic perception of the Al Saud that they have a special role to play as the agents of Islamic purification. This Islamic element in the legitimacy of the Al Saud leads the Kingdom to proclaim itself as the quintessential Islamic state. For this reason, the country exhibits an extraordinary religious and social conservatism, as a result of which the government finds it extremely difficult to make many domestic changes.

The second Islamic responsibility comes from Saudi control of the two holiest cities in Islam: Mecca, with the great mosque housing the *Ka'bah* (the small building that forms the spiritual and geographic centre of Islam), and Medina, the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad. The international responsibilities devolving on the Saudi state include both the administration of the *haj* (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca of Muslims from all over the world) and a role as spokesman and advocate for Islamic causes throughout the world.

In practical terms, Saudi Arabia sponsors an Islamic foreign policy that operates alongside its secular foreign policy. The two may link up on certain issues: for example, support for beleaguered Muslim populations in countries such as Afghanistan and Bosnia. Another congruence lies in Saudi Arabia's founding of, and its strong support for, such entities as the World Muslim League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which help to enhance Saudi Arabia's aura of leadership throughout the Islamic world.<sup>34</sup>

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Saudi regime has established a formidable array of religious and quasi-religious organs intended to promote Islam within and outside the country. Over time, many of these organs acquired an independence based on the reluctance of secular authorities to interfere with their unimpeachable religious duty. Thus in many respects the Islamic foreign policy operates independently of the Foreign Ministry. Various components engage in proselytisation, the construction of mosques in Islamic countries and the distribution of Korans around the world. The constituents of the Islamic foreign policy may even cut across the secular foreign policy: in countries of mixed religion, such as Sudan or Nigeria, the Islamic foreign-policy objective of propagating Islam may undermine the secular policy aim of maintaining good relations with the governments. This became a matter of particular concern after the 11 September attacks.

The Kingdom therefore faces a dilemma not unlike the one faced by the new Soviet Union when it was forced to choose between serving as the vanguard of an international revolutionary movement and accepting the responsibilities of a nation-state in an international community. Whilst Saudi Arabia's secular foreign policy seeks to ensure the physical security of the country via whatever means and alliances apply, the Islamic foreign policy is engaged in promoting a religious agenda of a particularly conservative nature. The problem is made more complex when the Islamic foreign policy interacts with devout private citizens in the context of humanitarian aid and religious support. Inevitably some use the mantle of religion for political purposes. The provision of official and unofficial Saudi support for Muslims fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan led to the phenomenon of the 'Arab Afghans', one of whom was Osama bin Laden. Thus, reactionary Muslim elements solicit and receive financial assistance that is distributed to

radical groups around the world, such as the Chechen resistance in Russia, Kashmiri separatists in India and the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas in the Philippines.

### **Old themes, new emphases**

Saudi foreign policy has been remarkably constant over the last few decades, and there is little need to change – indeed little room for manoeuvre. The Saudis remain heavily committed to their partnership with the United States, and it would be counterproductive for either Riyadh or Washington to alter relations. The Kingdom also values its economic, political and security relations with other Western countries. Saudi Arabia continues to carry considerable weight in Arab circles, and this factor – along with genuine concern over the plight of the Palestinians and an attempt to dampen the most troubling source of Saudi–American friction – undoubtedly lay behind Prince Abdullah’s initiative for Arab–Israeli peace in February 2002.

Saudi Arabia’s cardinal concern remains the Gulf, of course. Its fraternal relations with other GCC members continue to be strong, but Riyadh has also worked assiduously to improve relations with Iran, and the Bush administration’s adoption of a hard-line *vis-à-vis* the Islamic Republic adds another complication to US–Saudi relations. Iraq, however, remains the second most troubling point of friction between Riyadh and Washington. Iraq is still beyond the pale, but there is some feeling in the Kingdom that re-integrating it into the Arab system is not incompatible with the desired removal of Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration’s growing bellicosity on Iraq undoubtedly causes sleepless nights in Riyadh.

It may still be too early to gauge the impact of September 2001 on the Islamic dimension of Saudi foreign policy, but it is clear that Saudi Arabia has been embarrassed by its handling of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, as well as by criticism of Wahabism and ‘Wahabi’ proselytising outside the Kingdom. It has already placed well-publicised restrictions on Islamic charities sending funds abroad, and it is quite likely that there will be stricter central government supervision of other Islamic propagation activities. Beyond Afghanistan, South Asia continues to be troublesome for Saudi foreign policy. Riyadh has no choice but to support Pakistan, just as the United States discovered for itself after 11 September, but it remains troubled by that state’s continuing weakness, sectarian

strife and the refuge provided to al-Qaeda in ungoverned areas. In addition, there remains the real threat of war between Pakistan and India and the collateral damage that would cause in the Gulf.

### **Saudi Arabia and the West: divergent security expectations?**

Reliance on the United States as a partner in and guarantor of Saudi security has become the central pillar of Saudi strategy. The Kingdom has based its security needs, and therefore its alliance with America, on the dependability and credibility of the US strategic 'umbrella'. This does not mean, of course, that Washington and Riyadh see eye-to-eye on all means of providing that security, let alone on all the issues involved.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western policy has centred the maintenance of Gulf security on containing Iraq and Iran. The West requires Saudi Arabia, as well as the other the GCC members, to participate in this strategy, because measures taken in the name of Gulf security are taken ostensibly to defend GCC states, either through territorial protection (e.g. preventing an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or Saudi Arabia) or by protecting oil (its production and transport out of the Gulf – and hence continuing revenues for the GCC states).

GCC cooperation is needed to enforce the policy of containment: GCC states provide facilities for *Southern Watch*, the programme for enforcing the 'no-fly' zone in Iraq's largely Shiite south, and permit the use of their ports for Western naval visits and refuelling. At the same time, the West needs the political backing of Saudi Arabia and the GCC for its political goals and arrangements in order to maintain the legitimacy of the policy.

A foundation of the relationship between the West and Saudi Arabia is that a tacit *quid pro quo* exists. Saudi Arabia will seek to provide sufficient oil at reasonable prices and will recycle its income by purchasing arms and other Western goods; in return the West will provide protection from external threats and favourable trading terms and will invest in Saudi Arabia through offset programmes.<sup>35</sup> By this conception, the relationship between the West and the Kingdom should involve rapport on various planes, including military cooperation, political and diplomatic congruence and an integrated security framework.

A fundamental principle of the Western conception is that a direct and continuing US and Western military presence in the Gulf region is required. The most permanent element of this presence is the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, which has operated out of Bahrain since the 1940s. For most of this period its major mission has been to fly the flag, since its operational capability was always too small to constitute a deterrent by itself. Since the 1987 'tanker war', though, the US Navy has maintained a more robust presence in the region by rotating task forces, including carrier groups, through the Gulf and surrounding waters. European nations have contributed smaller flotillas from time to time, and regular naval visits have become routine. Another aspect of the American and British (and initially French) presence has been the operation of personnel and equipment to sustain *Southern Watch*. More substantial Western military presence in the Gulf has come through bilateral relationships with Gulf allies. For several decades, these relationships have included negotiated agreements for access to local facilities and the repositioning of supplies for emergency use. Facility access primarily has meant use of air installations, including Prince Sultan Air Base at al-Kharj in Saudi Arabia.

Another important aspect of the military relationship is the supply of arms, equipment, materiel, training and other support to Gulf allies. Saudi Arabia has been amongst the world's largest arms purchasers over the last several decades, and the lion's share of the transactions has involved Western countries. The scale of some of these deals is enormous and involves many complications; a good example is the two *al-Yamamah* deals between Britain and Saudi Arabia. In the mid-1980s the Kingdom encountered difficulties getting US Congressional approval of arms sales agreed with the American administration, and so turned to Britain. The result was the *al-Yamamah-I* arms deal of 1985, with a total value of some \$5–7bn, for 72 *Tornado* combat aircraft and 60 other aircraft. The cost was to be financed by oil deliveries to Britain and, in an 'offset' deal, Britain undertook to invest some of its proceeds in Saudi industrialisation projects. But three years later all this was dwarfed by *al-Yamamah-II*, a truly massive arms deal worth between \$12bn and \$25bn and including 50 more *Tornados*, 60 *Hawk* trainer aircraft, 50 *Blackhawk* helicopters, six minesweepers and the building of several large air bases. The subsequent decline in oil prices, however, meant

that substantial parts of the order were cancelled or delayed in following years.

Just as important as arms sales are military training programmes. These range from long-term training and professionalisation support for entire services (such as the American programme for the modernisation of the Saudi National Guard) to the short-term provision of training on newly acquired arms. In addition to in-country assistance, all Western countries provide places in staff colleges and other military educational establishments for Saudi officers. The value of these programmes goes far beyond the specific training involved to the creation of life-long bonds of camaraderie and cooperation. Another means of strengthening military ties is through official visits (notably by the Commander-in-Chief and staff of the US Central Command) and joint exercises with some GCC states.

Equally important for Western goals is the maintenance of a common political front. Washington has regularly pressured Saudi Arabia to back the US position on Iraqi sanctions and the no-fly zones, which, officially and formally, Riyadh has done with varying degrees of reluctance. Inducing Riyadh to provide diplomatic support for the Western policy of containing Iran has been more difficult, for Saudi Arabia has pursued a policy of rapprochement with the Islamic Republic in recent years, despite Washington's misgivings and intimations that Iran was behind the barracks bombing in al-Khobar.<sup>36</sup>

More generally, the West seeks to encourage the Gulf states to exercise moderation on other Arab states *vis-à-vis* Israel (which included persuading Oman and Qatar to permit Israeli trade missions in their capitals) and to exert their influence on unfriendly Arab states such as Syria and Libya. Beyond this, the West desires a coordination of interests and relations between the Gulf states and other American allies in the region, such as Egypt, Jordan and Turkey, in order to build up a coalition of partners against common enemies. Finally, of course, the West expects Saudi Arabia to exercise its influence in OPEC councils in favour of abundant oil supplies and against actions that will raise prices. Furthermore, the West wants Saudi Arabia to persuade the GCC as a whole to adopt pro-Western policies, even though – or perhaps because – the security relationship between the West and the GCC itself has been seriously under-developed, probably because it has been easier for Western

policy-makers to deal with individual governments than with the GCC as a single entity.

Despite Western efforts to cajole Saudi Arabia to follow its lead, a fundamental question remains unanswered. To what extent are Western conceptions of Gulf security predicated on real Saudi needs, and especially on requirements that do not dovetail with Western interests?

Just as Saudi Arabia is the cornerstone of Western strategic policy, the United States – and, to a lesser extent, other European powers – has been the cornerstone of Saudi strategic policy. The principal Saudi relationship is with the United States, and military ties are entwined in many ways. Recent defence expenditures for Saudi Arabia alone have averaged around \$20bn a year, and the Kingdom received arms deliveries worth \$65.9bn between 1993 and 2000.<sup>37</sup> Over the years the United States has been the principal supplier of arms to the Kingdom, and the bulk of air force and army equipment is purchased from the US. The total value of arms agreements from 1950 to early 1997 was \$93.8bn. Agreements from 1991 to 1998 totalled \$22.8bn in value, about 20% of which was for lethal equipment, more than 30% for support services, and somewhat less than 20% for building military bases and facilities (mostly completed before 1990).<sup>38</sup> The US Army Corps of Engineers long played a prominent role in Saudi development projects and was responsible for the construction of a number of Saudi military facilities. The principal element of US military assistance at present is the US training mission to the Saudi Arabian National Guard, involving nearly 100 US personnel.<sup>39</sup> In addition, private defence contractors continue to provide many services.

Although the United States is by far Saudi Arabia's most important military supplier, the Saudis have been careful to share out their purchases. Thus Britain won the two *al-Yamamah* contracts mentioned earlier, and the French play a leading role in supplying and advising the navy. Of the \$65.9bn of arms deliveries received by the Kingdom during 1993–2000, Britain, France, Germany and Italy provided \$31.5bn, compared to \$28.3bn from the United States.<sup>40</sup> Extending the use of military facilities for regional operations (such as *Southern Watch*) and providing in-country assistance have been other means of assuring assistance when required as well.

But heavy reliance on the United States carries many risks. When the dominant partner in a big power/small power relationship is also the world's sole superpower, the small power must be prepared

to have its arm twisted. This has been apparent, for example, in pressure to buy American goods, pressure to buy American arms, pressure to provide greater access to local military facilities and insistence on some degree of extra-territoriality for American service personnel. In addition, the penalty of close identification with the United States is that this often attracts criticism, both domestically and from abroad, because of American policies elsewhere in the region and world. Moreover, close connections with Israel's strongest supporter are viewed with dismay by many sectors of Saudi Arabia's population and provoke strong denunciations from other countries. (Of course, this also means that US policy objectives *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, especially arms sales, are vulnerable to pressure and disruption by Israel and its supporters in the US.) Underlying everything, though, is a fear – rarely voiced officially but frequently discussed privately – that Washington may not be a reliable ally. After all, the somewhat paradoxical arguments go, the US walked away when the Shah's regime began to crumble, and strong declarations of commitment in places like Lebanon and Somalia quickly disappeared when American soldiers died.

The present security arrangements have evolved over the course of decades and undoubtedly are the most efficient possible under current Gulf security conceptions. It is highly unlikely that either the will or the capacity exists for a Western security umbrella without the US. Japan already imports a large amount of Gulf oil, and China and even India are likely to greatly increase their imports in the next decade, yet Japan's ability to contribute to Gulf security is minimal, and there is little likelihood of either China or India doing any more.

Political considerations would seem to doom any significant long-term provision of Arab forces. The promise of the Damascus Declaration, tying the GCC with Syria and Egypt, the two most prominent Arab participants in Operation *Desert Storm*, quickly evaporated and has become a dead issue. There remains the question of what effective role collective security within the GCC might play.

### **The regional framework: GCC collective security**

Saudi security concerns have been inextricably linked to those of its five allies in the GCC since the formation of the alliance in 1981. The GCC states share common threat perceptions and military limitations,

and they have pursued similar defensive strategies and sought collaborative defence arrangements. Thus it makes sense to discuss Saudi and GCC concerns together. The fundamental defence policy on which the Gulf states have relied since the formation of the GCC (and before) has been a holding strategy of initial self-defence until the Western cavalry arrives from over the horizon. Gulf governments have sought to guarantee this protection for themselves by several means.

One method is to sign direct bilateral agreements: in the years after its liberation, Kuwait negotiated bilateral agreements with the US, Britain and France. Bilateral military exercises also strengthen at least the aura of cooperation. Another technique is to buy arms and other military equipment from protecting countries. The Gulf states have consistently ranked among the top arms purchasers in the world. In 1997 Saudi Arabia ranked ninth in the world in military expenditures (\$21.195bn), even though the size of its armed forces (180,000) ranked thirty-first. It was also the world's largest arms importer (\$11.6bn), and the other GCC members ranked fifth (Kuwait, \$2bn), ninth (UAE, \$1.4bn), eighteenth (Qatar, \$625m), forty-fifth (Oman, \$160m) and fifty-ninth (Bahrain, \$90m).<sup>41</sup> Gulf countries often pay top price for such arms and equipment, and frequently also buy an entire package of supplies and training, which adds considerably to the transaction cost. Furthermore, since many such purchases are top-of-the-line, the deal with Gulf buyers extends the production run and reduces the unit cost, which benefits the armed forces of the protecting powers as well. Gulf states typically over-buy for their current needs, thus possibly providing a store of arms and supplies that could be used by allies in an emergency.

In many ways, the six GCC members are perfectly matched: they are all monarchies with tribally based ruling families, and they have small, relatively homogenous societies and oil-dependent economies. Yet there are two principal factors that inhibit cooperation and coordination of policies in all spheres, including security strategy. The first is that, although Saudi Arabia may be a small state on the world stage, it is a giant in comparison to its GCC partners (or, as one prominent Saudi put it in a private conversation, the GCC consists of a shark and five little fish). Among other things, this inequality reduces the prospects for further GCC integration, because further steps in this direction inevitably will increase Saudi

domination of the alliance and control over its neighbours. This would appear to be the principal obstacle, for example, behind the failure of the GCC to implement the proposal made by Sultan Qabus of Oman after the liberation of Kuwait to expand the small joint Peninsula Shield Force to 100,000 men.<sup>42</sup>

The second problem appears on closer examination of the GCC states. While they are similar and compatible in many respects, there is among the six countries a historical pattern of hostility between immediate neighbours, and the smaller countries (with the exception of Bahrain) have all experienced Saudi aggression over the past two centuries. This means that relations within the GCC can be prickly, and even severely strained. Until recently Bahrain and Qatar have been at loggerheads over a number of territorial questions; Saudi–Qatari relations flare up at intervals over seemingly trivial matters; and it took until the late 1990s for Oman and the UAE to establish embassies in each other’s capitals.

Still, the GCC members have little choice but to stick together. To extend the piscine metaphor above, the GCC states can be characterised as small fish in a glass bowl with cats for neighbours. The requirement for coordinated security strategy is obvious and recognised, but achieving the necessary coordination has been an uphill struggle. Even well after the Iranian Revolution and the eruption of the Iran–Iraq War, Kuwait continued to insist that Gulf security was a purely regional affair, and that the great powers should keep their distance. Oman was seen within the alliance as the odd man out for its insistence that security depended on close and dependable military relationships with Western countries.

Kuwaiti attitudes flip-flopped with the tanker war in 1987, and then rapidly moved to the other extreme after the Iraqi invasion in 1990, but serious disagreements persist. GCC military committees and summits issue statements of impending cooperation in air defence; the token Peninsula Shield Force exists; and bilateral and joint exercises are held regularly. Yet the states all pursue independent and uncoordinated procurement policies; they buy from an enormous range of suppliers; the exercises are staged largely for show; and the Peninsula Shield Force is chiefly symbolic.

Disagreements continue to include differences over how far cooperation with the United States and the West is desirable. For example, Oman and Qatar are criticised for having allowed Israel to

open trade offices, presumably at the insistence of the US. The rift is seen internally as well, with the Kuwaiti National Assembly opposing the ruling family's perceived acquiescence in US demands, and with the existence of some organised clandestine opposition to the US presence in Saudi Arabia. While such quarrels are not likely to split the alliance (just as rows within ruling families are firmly kept in house), a fissiparous potential does exist, as exemplified a few years ago, when Qatar's new ruler seemed to emphasise ties to Iran and the United States as a counter to perceived GCC betrayal.

From the Saudi point of view, continued close cooperation with the GCC is necessary. The smaller Gulf states constitute Riyadh's vulnerable underbelly, and their defence is vital to the defence of the Kingdom itself. It stands to reason that closer co-ordination in security matters – whether it be expanded joint forces, a GCC-wide early-warning system, or reciprocal agreements that an attack upon one member is an attack upon all – will improve the security prospects of Saudi Arabia as much as or more than those of the GCC as a whole. In addition, even closer GCC integration is probably desirable for the Saudis, largely for the reasons that give the other Gulf states pause: the Kingdom's overwhelming relative size would mean greater Saudi authority in GCC political and security discussions, as well as economies of scale in an expanded economic market.

In short, Saudi Arabia's security depends on close and mutually beneficial relations with both the United States and the GCC, and, to a lesser extent, with other Western powers and Arab friends. Protection against the potentially threatening remainder of the world necessarily depends in the first instance on Saudi and GCC self-defence and ultimately on the Western strategic umbrella. There is no viable alternative on the current horizon. Paradoxically, though, strengthening ties to both the US and the GCC creates new problems and/or exacerbates existing ones. While the relationship with the GCC is not likely to change substantially in the next decade or two, the Saudi–American connection will be tested by a number of issues, such as Israel and Palestine, policy towards Iraq, bilateral cooperation in the light of 11 September, American actions *vis-à-vis* the Arab and Islamic worlds and developments inside Saudi Arabia.