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THE UNITED STATES AND THE GULF: A FRAYING RELATIONSHIP

The seemingly interminable Iran-Iraq war has drifted finally into ceasefire. From Washington, it seems reasonable to assume that an end to the fighting enhances American standing in the Gulf, even as it allows the United States to step back from the brink of direct involvement. Conventional wisdom also holds that the strong US response to Iranian provocations arrested the damage in the region caused by the Iran-contra affair. For these and other reasons, the prevailing assumption in Washington is that relations with the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are good and getting better.

But all is not well. I have spent a total of several years conducting academic research in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf over the past decade and a half. I have held discussions with several thousand Gulf citizens, ranging from shopkeepers, drivers and bedouin to cabinet ministers and senior members of ruling families. These conversations have led me to conclude that popular attitudes towards the United States, and especially towards the American government, are becoming increasingly negative. Such changes in popular opinion already are influencing government policies and are likely to do so even more forcefully in the future. The causes of these attitudes may not always be logically consistent, but they are prevalent and widespread.

Fundamentally, the Arab states of the Gulf see themselves caught between two deadly threats: Iran on the east and Israel on the West. On a visit to one of the smaller Gulf states in early 1986, a senior member of the ruling family (and former ambassador to Iran) told me in all seriousness that the superpowers were working together to prolong the Iran-Iraq war because it served their mutual interests. I dismissed his interpretation as pure fantasy but it soon transpired that Washington had been selling weapons to Iran at the same time that it was providing satellite photographs of battlefields to Iraq. Such behavior directly feeds a Middle Eastern propensity to believe in conspiracy theories and creates suspicions that are virtually impossible to repudiate.

The Gulf Arabs long have been leery of Iranian intentions in the Gulf. The Shah's massive US-promoted arms build-up was regarded as a potential threat by his smaller Gulf neighbors. The secret American arms sale to Iran confirms long-held suspicions that the United States is inherently anti-Arab and that Washington is as willing to deal with revolutionary Iran as it was with the Shah, even if that means selling out its Arab friends. Somewhat paradoxically, people also illustrate their doubts about American dependability in times of crisis by pointing to Washington's desertion of the

Shah in his last days in Tehran and especially the precipitate withdrawal from Lebanon after the attack on the Marine barracks.

Washington insiders contend that the damage caused by the Iran-contra affair has been reversed by the massive American naval build-up in the Gulf over the last year. They argue that the Gulf states are grateful that the "cavalry" arrived to protect them and, as evidence, point to growing links with Kuwait. But this is not the perception in the Gulf. Instead, it is noted that the US is in the Gulf solely to protect its own interests: to preserve the flow of oil and to keep the Soviet Union and Iran in check.

Kuwait's actions are based on simple pragmatism. It has found itself in one of the most exposed positions imaginable over the last decade, trapped between two much more powerful neighbors. The desire to seek assistance and purchase arms from the United States does not change Kuwait's fundamental neutralist outlook, any more than the purchase of arms from and growing economic ties with Moscow makes Kuwait a Soviet satellite. Indeed, the Iran-Iraq ceasefire prompted the Kuwaiti foreign minister to remark that the necessity for an American presence in the Gulf had come to an end.

There has been a tendency in the United States to separate the Gulf (sometimes dealt with as "Southwest Asia") from Arab-Israeli matters (sometimes labelled as "the Middle East"). No such distinction exists in the Arab world. There are some who argue that Gulf Arab concern with the Arab-Israeli conflict owes little more than fear of Palestinian or Syrian hostility. This ignores, first of all, the emotive strength of Arab nationalism and Islamic community. Furthermore, the several million Egyptian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Lebanese, and other expatriate Arabs who work in the Gulf as government employees, schoolteachers, company managers and journalists provide a persistent reminder of the conflict with Israel. The fate of Palestine and the Palestinians is as emotionally charged and of as direct concern to people in the Gulf as is Alaska or California to Americans.

A few months ago, I watched footage of the Palestinian uprising on Saudi Arabian television juxtaposed night after night with stories on the US government's attempt to close the PLO Observer Mission to the United Nations. There was no need for arcane conspiracy theories here; the connection between the two events was crystal clear, as numerous Saudis told me. I received a 45-minute lecture on the American bias against the Arabs and Saudi Arabia by a member of the Saudi council of ministers, who had worked for the American embassy many years ago. His manner and tone were polite, but his conclusions were bitter. More direct were the words with the editor of a major Saudi newspaper and his top staff; the following day an editorial appeared, attacking "above average Americans" for not doing enough to educate their fellow citizens about the injustice of the Palestinian problem.

As the citizens of the Arab Gulf states become more educated and more widely traveled, and as their television, radio and newspapers reach more people, these negative attitudes will intensify. The news stories and editorials in the state-owned newspapers in the United Arab Emirates already are strongly hostile toward the United States, and Kuwaiti and Qatari papers are not far behind.

Two years ago, I sat with a respected elder from the interior of Oman and his young aides. They asked me to explain why the United States was against the Arabs and supported Israel in everything it did. They appeared puzzled as I struggled for the proper words in Arabic to convey the complexity of the American political system. I am afraid I left them as baffled as ever, but I also fear

that their puzzlement will gradually turn to frustration and hostility, as it is doing already among the more educated and articulate.

A seeming pillar of the Saudi-American relationship has been the more than 100,000 Saudi students who have lived and studied in the United States. Many, in a way, are almost "homesick" and are eager to talk to Americans about the good times they spent here during formative years in their lives. Yet, those same Saudis are just as likely to return home with memories of racial prejudice and television programs or movies sporting gross caricatures of Arabs and Saudis.

A few years ago, Saudi Arabia sent some 13,000 students a year to the United States. Today, the figure is about 3000 and the expansion of the higher education system in the kingdom will mean even smaller numbers in the future. If younger Saudis have no first-hand experience of the United States, they are less likely to give the American system the benefit of the doubt.

What effect might this deterioration in public opinion have on government policies? Contrary to popular conceptions in the West, the monarchical systems of Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states are highly responsive to the needs and opinions of their citizens. Current leaders may regard political and security cooperation with the United States as necessary, particularly as long as the waters of the Gulf remain turbulent (one wonders how well the US flotilla in the Gulf would have been received if there had been no incident during the 1987 pilgrimage to Mecca). But they will not pursue policies that their citizens are dead set against.

We can expect the next generation of GCC leaders to be less disposed to work with and be identified with the United States. It is widely assumed, for example, that Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia will be more "pro-Arab" and less pro-American than King Fahd, given his more conservative nature, his power base among the kingdom's traditionalist elements, and his strong ties to Arab states outside of the Gulf. Other influential princes (including sons of present leaders) already argue that Saudi Arabia should be more pragmatic in acquiring arms – i.e. look for the best deal possible regardless of political considerations.

At an extreme, we may be faced with a worst-case scenario. Five, ten or even twenty years from now, chances are that the long period of oil glut will revert to another era of scarcity. By then, American production stands to be in sharp decline, North Sea oil will be past its peak, and OPEC will have shrunk to a core of Gulf states which currently possess about two-thirds of total world reserves. New leaders in the Gulf will see less reason to cooperate with the United States.

There is little chance that the Arab-Israeli conflict will have been brought to an end and the United States, far from being a peacebroker, undoubtedly will be perceived as Israel's partner. In the event of another Arab-Israeli war, the Gulf producers will be pressured again to institute an oil embargo against the United States. In 1973, the Arab oil embargo hardly made a dent in world oil supplies. Decades of disappointment, increasingly unfavorable public attitudes, new leaders, and a steady fraying of relations may mean that those producers will be more willing to institute another embargo but, this time, one with real teeth.

Even in the absence of another war, a continuing deterioration of relations may very well entail changes in financial patterns. The Kuwaiti National Assembly, before its 1986 suspension under the impact of the Iran-Iraq war, vigorously criticized the government for investing much of its surplus oil income in the United States and the West. Although economically undesirable, politics could force the Gulf states to abandon the dollar as the medium of payment for oil in favor of a basket of currencies.

Shifts in the policies of the GCC states can be discerned already. Three years ago, Kuwait was the only GCC state to have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. This has changed dramatically. Oman's establishment of relations in 1985 was followed by the United Arab Emirates in 1986 and Qatar this summer. Contacts between Moscow and Riyadh have increased in frequency and intensity and it seems only a matter of time before they also establish normal relations. Formal ties with both superpowers should be considered normal and healthy. At the same time, however, the rapprochement with Moscow seems to signify that the GCC states no longer feel that exclusive reliance on the United States and the West provides them with the security they require.

While no GCC state desires a rupture or strain in its ties with the United States, impatience with American policy-makers grows by leaps and bounds. In 1980, Oman was the only GCC state to agree to some formal American use of its military facilities; the renewal of the agreement in 1985 was far more difficult and the access of American diplomats to the Omani government is increasingly restricted. Bahrain has contributed extensively but discreetly to the US Navy's requirements in the Gulf for more than 40 years and has been especially cooperative during the past fifteen months. Yet its request to purchase Stinger missiles was criticized and nearly refused by Congress. Ironically, the sale was approved only after those same missiles were obtained by Iran for possible use against Bahrain and its neighbors.

Saudi patience and pride have been strained by the rigorous and often hostile debates which Congress has conducted over arms sales to the kingdom. Saudis frequently remark on the contrast between the kingdom's close and cooperative relationship with the United States for more than 50 years and the scrutiny, suspicion and ill-will it suffers with each arms request.

In 1985, the Reagan administration apparently advised the Saudis to buy Tornado fighters and other aircraft from Britain because of the difficulties of getting Congress to approve a sale of similar American equipment. In 1988, Saudi Arabia turned first to Britain for additional Tornados, other equipment and several airbases in what is described as potentially the largest arms deal ever. It is an ironic reversal from the 1940s, when British diplomats lamented the loss of their favored position in Saudi Arabia to the upstart Americans.

There are similar stories with neighboring countries. Kuwait, in the market for nearly \$2 billion of arms centered on the F-18, reacted to a Congressional ban on accompanying Maverick D missiles by pointedly signing a new arms deal with the Soviet Union for armored personnel carriers. Kuwait hinted that it too would seek Tornados from the UK if turned down on even just part of the F-18 and Maverick G package. Oman already has bought another Tornado variant. Beyond the loss of American jobs and business, the irony is that non-American suppliers of arms will not impose restrictions on their use or basing, as would have been the case with US weapons.

Another recent indication of underlying problems was Saudi Arabia's secret acquisition of ballistic missiles from China. Riyadh's drastic reaction to the American disapproval of this development – declaring the American ambassador *persona non grata* – indicates the extent of its frustration and displeasure with Washington. The Saudis asserted that Riyadh would no more let the US inspect the Chinese missiles than it would let the Chinese inspect American-built AWACS.

In addition, Saudis seem irritated that the American press, refusing to accept this explanation, speculated that the expulsion must have been due to the king's personal dislike of the ambassador or perhaps because of his half-Iranian ancestry. As one Foreign Ministry official told me, it is more logical to assume that the United States government, given its dismal relations with Iran over the last

decade, should be more concerned over the ambassador's ancestry than the kingdom (which, after all, counts many prominent families of Iranian ancestry among its citizens).

These rows are not temporary disturbances. Prince Muhammad al-Faysal, a son of Saudi Arabia's late King Faysal, told an American audience in June 1988 that "we are giving up on the US" because it is not a dependable partner. Further emphasis came in October when Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci warned that "the US will meet increased difficulty in achieving the broad range of our foreign policy objectives in the region, as Arab states now turning to Soviet and other non-American sources of military advice and assistance become less receptive to American policy positions." It is not too late to stop the threads of trust and confidence from unravelling, but a requisite first step must be putting an end to the present complacency.