

# Making Friends

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

May 1, 2004

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

---



## Articles & Testimony

**D**espite the recent chaos in Iraq and the uncertain future of the country, it is clear that the post-Saddam Hussein Middle East is a very different place. There might not be peace yet between Israelis and Palestinians, but Libya's decision to give up weapons of mass destruction is an indication that surprising moves and big changes are possible. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Gulf where, instead of referring to the 'Saudi-led Arab Gulf states', one must increasingly use the phrase 'conservative Arab Gulf states apart from Saudi Arabia'.

In the months following the terror attacks of September 11 2001, it became increasingly clear that Saudi Arabia was no longer fulfilling its Washington-backed leadership role in the Gulf.

Troubled by apparently widespread domestic sympathy for Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network, the Saudi royal family began to withdraw much of its support for the United States' diplomatic and military moves, first against Afghanistan and then Iraq.

Washington's response has been to develop relationships with the other conservative Arab Gulf states Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman while officially claiming that relations with Riyadh continue to be excellent.

This policy contributed greatly to the success of the US-led coalition that overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein in April. Yet the ground-work for deepening relations with these states was effectively laid in the early 1990s.

After the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, these countries permitted Washington to establish semi-permanent military facilities on their territory to help impose UN sanctions on Iraq and contain any threat from the Islamic regime in Iran. This foothold also enabled US and other allied forces to react quickly and effectively against the Taliban in Afghanistan following September 11.

Staying on

The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait all demonstrated the need for a major American role in the Gulf. But the main reason for the continuing US presence in this dangerous neighbourhood has been and will continue to be the fact that it contains two-thirds of the world's oil reserves.

The six conservative Arab Gulf states hold nearly half of the global total, with Saudi Arabia accounting for more than half of this. Although America is not directly dependent on Gulf oil, the rest of the world is. Any interruption or restriction of supply would quickly result in much higher prices worldwide, with a consequent negative impact on every national economy.

So despite the fall of Saddam's regime, the US needs to stay in the area. And despite Iran's latest agreements allowing inspections of its nuclear facilities, the conservative Arab Gulf states remain fearful of the Islamic republic.

Although these countries often spend vast sums on the most modern military hardware, the effectiveness of their armies remains dubious at best. On their own, these forces would have little hope of deterring, let alone countering, the military might of Iran, which has the largest conventional army in the region. Hence, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, they have been pleased to accept a continuing US security presence.

This does not necessarily mean a smooth journey. The gratitude of these governments is marked by caution because of the implications of maintaining links with Washington and the potential consequences if it were to scale down its commitment. Before the overthrow in Iraq, the conservative Arab Gulf states preferred to remain mere friends of Washington rather than becoming firm allies. In the case of Saudi Arabia, even the word 'friends' may be an overstatement. Although such relational distance might compare negatively to what the US enjoys with friendly states in other parts of the world, Washington may have to tolerate the unusual nature of these friendships indefinitely.

Get off the fence

The reasons for this caution are not hard to see. Habits of history die hard. None of the conservative Arab Gulf states had a sovereign existence prior to the twentieth century. For hundreds of years before the discovery of oil, the various ruling families eked out an existence by trade and sometimes by piracy, making diplomatic deals with rivals and imperial powers when necessary. The incredible wealth that these countries have gained from oil and gas, coupled with their small populations, has perpetuated the sense of vulnerability felt by the ruling families.

Given these factors, the continuing US presence may remain diplomatically awkward. Nevertheless, the challenges posed by the transition to a new government in Iraq, as well as the continuing strains in Iran's theocratic regime, will require Washington to maintain a major military presence in the region for the foreseeable future, particularly in the smaller conservative Arab Gulf states. Now that these states are freed from the dominance of Saudi Arabia, they should be encouraged to abandon any fence-sitting posture.

The task of improving relations could be hindered by decision-making gridlock resulting from ageing leaderships and tensions over succession. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE are already affected by such factors, while the leaders of Bahrain and Qatar lack experience. Moreover, Gulf politics are frequently personal: slights are as often deliberate as unintentional, and a long history of rivalries and border disputes stokes the flames of disagreement.

Nevertheless, the US has a great interest in promoting stability and preserving peace. Over the years, Washington has encouraged slow but deliberate political evolution to more participatory systems, so that local stability relies on consent rather than control. Although political mechanisms in Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the lead UAE state, remain sources of concern, advances in other conservative Arab Gulf states contrast favourably with the perceived retardation of political progress in the Arab world's post-monarchical, republican regimes.

For example, Oman and Qatar have shown a public willingness to break Arab ranks by establishing links with Israel, sustaining those ties even after the eruption of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000. Other conservative Arab Gulf regimes have shown a more confused approach, claiming support for the peace process and quietly exchanging views with visiting Israeli delegations, while also backing Palestinian rejectionists.

Kill the council

Washington must adopt an approach that is both clear and sensitive a difficult goal when immediate military requirements might sit uncomfortably with longer-term diplomatic objectives. In particular, Washington should encourage the collapse of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the quasi-diplomatic club with military undertones that comprises all six states. Its continuing existence, dominated by Saudi Arabia, means it could develop as an anti-US body.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries of which Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE are all members should be countered as well. It might smooth out price fluctuations, but its preference for high prices is counter to the economic interests of the rest of the world.

The way forward for Washington is to approach individual states on a one-to-one basis. The US position would then be less vulnerable to intra-Gulf rivalries and more effective at playing on the dependency of individual states. The changes in the Gulf set off by the collapse of Saddam's regime offer too important a range of opportunities to be constrained by petty regional rivalries.

What about the role in the Gulf of Europe or, in particular, Britain? The European Union seems to be irrelevant other than as a trading partner. Having backed the losing side, France and Russia are thought locally to be diplomatically pointless. The position of Britain is more interesting because it is the junior occupation partner to the US and has a longer diplomatic history among conservative Arab Gulf states.

The current intellectual competition over Iraq between London and Washington is whether the British preference for stability will win over the US predilection for participation. Of course, the former implies a tolerance of Iran, which a second Bush administration would certainly want to challenge. It will be interesting to see whether the small Arab Gulf states pick a preference.

Simon Henderson was a member of the Chatham House Council until last year. He is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which last year published his study *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and US Strategy*. ❖

World Today

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

### TOPICS

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)