

# Gulf Sheikhdoms Have America in Their Future

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**L**ift up your eyes. Look to the future. There is a different world out there than the diet of Middle Eastern violence and anti-Americanism that we are fed in Europe, and that people of the Middle East are being served up as well. Nowhere is this truer than in the Gulf. With little or no fanfare during the last few years, the leaders of the conservative Arab states there have decided that the United States is the country in their future.

Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman are the ones who have made the choice. (Saudi Arabia has decided differently or perhaps, through inertia, has just not decided anything). These states have become close allies of the United States, and two years ago enabled the US-led coalition to operate effectively against Osama bin Laden and the Taleban in Afghanistan. This year they were crucial in the campaign to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq

Together, these sheikhdoms are the "new pillar" in American relations with the Middle East, filling the gap created by two other onetime regional pillars: Iran under the late Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi; and Saudi Arabia, whose relationship with the US was questioned after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Not only have the smaller Gulf states provided crucial diplomatic and military support to the US, they have also moved toward political openness and economic reform, despite their conservative social, cultural and political policies.

In some cases these ties with the US date back several decades. However, the crucial point of departure was probably the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, after which these countries allowed the United States to establish semi-permanent military facilities on their territories in order to help impose United Nations sanctions on Iraq and contain any threat from the Islamic regime in Iran.

Of course, the main reason why the US has strategic interests in the Gulf has been and will continue to be the region's containing two-thirds of the world's oil supply. The six Arab Gulf states together hold nearly half the global total, with Saudi Arabia accounting for nearly a quarter of the world's reserves. Although the United States is not directly dependent on Gulf oil, the rest of the world is. Any interruption in or restriction of supply would quickly result in much higher prices worldwide, with a consequent negative impact on all national economies.

Iraq's Baath regime has fallen, but the Arab Gulf sheikhdoms still remain fearful of Iran. Although these states often spend vast sums of money on the most modern military hardware, the effectiveness of their armies is dubious at

best. On their own, these forces would have little hope of deterring, let alone countering, Iranian military might, which rests on the largest conventional force of any state in the region. Hence, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, these states have been pleased to accept a continuing US security presence in their vicinity.

In choosing to go with the United States, the majority of the Gulf states are explicitly avoiding being neutral and implicitly avoiding other suitors such as Russia and France. The local rulers clearly don't think Moscow and Paris are regional players at the moment and perhaps never will be again. And it's not just the rulers. This new reality is apparent even to the humblest taxi driver.

What are pitfalls of this policy? For a start, the sheikhdoms are a cautious group. They must be considering the implications of their links with the US, as well as the potential consequences if Washington decides to scale down its commitment to them. Even before Saddam's overthrow, these states preferred to remain merely friends with the US, rather than become firm allies. In the case of Saudi Arabia, even the word "friend" may be overstating Riyadh's position. The Americans might have to tolerate some public distance in these relationships.

In Washington's eyes, the fall from grace of Saudi Arabia offers a bonus. The US might be able to persuade the Gulf sheikhdoms to abandon their traditional fence-sitting postures, especially with regard to Tehran. As a consequence of this, the demise of the Gulf Cooperation Council, nominally a group of equals but in reality Saudi-led, is a likelihood. It will certainly be increasingly moribund.

Some particular domestic dangers face Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Aging and ailing leaders are a concern in social environments where personal slights, both deliberate and unintentional, can have crucial significance. The United States has already used its Gulf presence to see through one transition in Bahrain. This role might need to be repeated.

Washington will also have to cope with a measure of persistent confusion by some of these regimes, which claim support for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process while also backing Palestinian rejectionists. Qatar and Oman already have relations with Israel that have endured despite occasional official statements to the contrary. Perhaps the Gulf sheikhdoms have an ability to compartmentalize their views. Palestinians in general, and their leader Yasser Arafat in particular, should perhaps interpret this in the new context of these countries' not letting relations with the Palestinians get in the way of their new alliances with the US.

Within this context, it is difficult to subscribe to deterministic notions that hatred of the United States will inexorably increase in the Middle East, and that the Americans will soon have to exit the region. If one had to chart the shifting fortunes in the region since Saddam's statue fell in Baghdad last April, the Americans and the Gulf sheikhdoms, minus Saudi Arabia, would surely move upwards. One cannot understate Islamic militancy, however this is a problem faced by all governments in the Middle East as well as the United States. Remember that the US led the West in halting and then destroying communism, and that Western economies expanded and prospered while this went on.

Studies and statistics show that with respect to numerous social and economic indicators, the Middle East is bumping along the bottom globally, with only Africa performing worse. The Arab Gulf state—some of which have economic indicators that many would metaphorically die for—have decided where their future lies. And contrary to a mindset all too prevalent in the Middle East, they have decided that their destiny is with Washington.

Simon Henderson is an energy consultant and a London-based associate of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which recently published his *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and US Strategy*. He wrote this commentary for the Daily Star. ❖

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