

The War against Terror:

The Caution of the Conservative Arab States of the Persian Gulf

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Brief Analysis

At a meeting over the weekend in the Saudi port city of Jeddah, foreign ministers of the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf pledged "total cooperation" for international efforts to bring those responsible for the terror attacks in New York and Washington to justice. But the nuances in attitudes of the group -- the oil states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman -- suggest that the United States faces huge difficulties in achieving, publicly at least, anything more than partial cooperation.

While expressing condolences and sympathy for the U.S. government and people -- particularly for the families of the victims -- the foreign ministers, meeting as member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), avoided backing U.S.-led military action. Their support was for "global" rather than U.S. efforts, and even this was for "tracking down the perpetrators and bringing them to justice." In another reference emphasizing the role of the international community rather than the United States, the ministers urged "the sponsors of the Middle East peace process and the European Union" not to forget the suffering of the Palestinian people who were "the victims of state terrorism practiced by Israel."

Concern with Peace Process

An almost obsessive attention to Israel has become the hallmark of Gulf Arab statements since the September 11 outrages. That same day, analysts noted a carefully worded Saudi statement condemning "all forms of terrorism," a coding habitually used for criticism of Israel, which was repeated in a later message from the ailing Saudi monarch, King Fahd. On September 17, the ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, explicitly told President Bush in a telephone call to "bring about an end to the Israeli terrorist attacks in the occupied Palestinian territories." Last week, after Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal's visit to Washington, a ministry official speaking to the Associated Press on condition of anonymity said, "Israel is a terrorist state based on occupation and is ruled by a world famous terrorist" -- an apparent reference to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. The official said the kingdom would not cooperate with a coalition if Israel were part of it. Assistance from "Arab and Gulf states must be preceded by a clear and specific declaration of which countries and groups will be targeted. We will not agree, under any conditions, to strikes against brotherly states, like Syria, or groups that resist the Israeli occupation, like Hamas,

Islamic Jihad, or Hezbollah."

Range of Security Concerns

All Gulf states are cautious of Iran, historically the dominant regional power. (Until it was broken this week, Saudi and UAE diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan could be seen as a card to hold against Iran.) All GCC members have Shi'a Muslim communities -- coreligionists of Iran -- whose members are often treated suspiciously and suffer from social and economic discrimination. Some suspicion is justified -- in the last twenty years, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain have been the targets of assassination, coup plots, and insurrection influenced, if not directly instigated, by Tehran.

Internal opposition is the security concern that should be uppermost on GCC minds when confronting the problem of terrorism illustrated by the September 11 attacks. That there is opposition should hardly be surprising -- the general population seldom benefits directly from the peaks in oil price, but they do suffer from reduced subsidies when the price falls. And there are few options for those upset at their countries' policies because of little public participation in the political process. Against this background, violent Islamist opposition appeals to some. Saudi Arabia appears to be in denial about Osama bin Laden, whose concerns for the removal of American forces and an even greater role for the strict Wahabi version of Islam appear to be shared by many in the general Saudi population. Saudi embassies abroad have been writing to local media asking them not to refer to bin Laden as being Saudi. (His citizenship was stripped on April 9, 1994.)

To the almost certain irritation of Riyadh, attitudes of other Gulf countries toward bin Laden have varied. According to some reports, the small emirate of Qatar allowed him to visit a beach guest house from time to time until he retreated into the Afghan mountains in 1999. Its al-Jazeera satellite TV channel has often been given favored access by bin Laden, covering the wedding of his son earlier this year, and this week receiving his faxed statement defying the United States and calling for Muslims in Afghanistan and Pakistan to rise up. Other Gulf states, especially Dubai (which is part of the UAE), have allowed funds for bin Laden to pass through its banks.

U.S. Priorities

The first priority for Washington will be to ensure that its Gulf allies provide the access and support needed for the immediate operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. GCC willingness to cooperate is likely to be greatest if the cooperation can be done without public acknowledgment, for instance, by being vague about what military assets are operating from where. Keeping the operations quiet will not be easy in the era of al-Jazeera and the internet. After the embarrassment last week of the Pentagon announcing the use of a command center in Saudi Arabia without prior agreement from Riyadh, the United States will be better off employing a zero-publicity policy (the main country for allied air activity in the Arabian peninsula is likely anyway to be Oman). But air space and landing rights for reconnaissance and transport aircraft will be needed, and these are likely to be provided.

The GCC states have not helped matters by making loud and tough statements about Israel, which will only encourage Arab journalists and anti-Western elements to pursue more vigorously the story of how actively the GCC states are assisting the United States.

The danger for the Gulf states, and in particular Saudi Arabia, is that they seem unwilling to face up to the internal threat that bin Laden's brand of Islamic radicalism poses. Arguably, given the preponderance of Saudis among the September 11 hijackers, Saudi Arabia faces as great an internal challenge as it did in 1989 when Islamic rebels seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. With the presence of the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina and 25 percent of the world's oil reserves (and another 20 percent among the rest of the GCC), the kingdom is a vital political and economic member of the world community. The Gulf regimes need to be convinced that the war against terrorism is not something they should do reluctantly to propitiate Washington, but is rather a matter of their own survival.

As it enlists local parties in the antiterrorist campaign, the United States will have to walk a fine line in balancing the interests of those Central Asian states that allow a U.S. military presence and those of regional powers, particularly Russia, that are capable of playing the role of a spoiler. What is clear is that the process of defining a strategy to target Bin Laden and his Afghan hosts will have the consequence of forcing a review of wider U.S. interests in the broader South Caucasus and Central Asia region.

Simon Henderson is an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute. His Institute Policy Paper [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy \(templateC04.php?CID=33\)](#) will be published in January 2002.

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