



## **The US-GCC Relationship**

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By Dr. John Duke Anthony

Looking at the development of US-GCC relations over the past 25 years, it is worth considering just how long ties have been established.

### **Context**

Although some would go back as far as the granting of Saudi Arabian oil concessions to the Americans in 1933 as the start of what would become the US relationship with the six countries that joined to forge the GCC, the foundations for the ('official') relationship in the modern era were laid over sixty years ago when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz, met aboard the USS Quincy on Great Bitter Lake, Egypt, on the 14th February, 1945. That was the date when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz met for the first and only time.

The meeting took place aboard the USS Quincy in the Bitter Lakes of the Suez Canal. Roosevelt was returning from a war conference in Tehran attended by Churchill and Stalin, America's two most important World War II Allies. At that meeting the American and Saudi Arabian heads of state launched a multifaceted strategic relationship that, despite its ups and downs, remains in tact to this day. Since then, the US has sought to build on this initial meeting of minds, pursuing strong strategic relationships with countries throughout the Gulf, as it has helped to develop and increasingly defend the region's energy resources.

In the ensuing years, one particular development catapulted the United States into an unprecedented position and role with regard to the GCC region. Presaging the establishment of the GCC in ways that eclipsed all other events was Great Britain's December 1967 decision to abrogate no later than December 1971 its nearly century and a half old treaty relationships with nine Gulf principalities by which it administered their foreign relations and defence. This set in motion the steps that led to Bahrain and Qatar joining Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which were already independent states, and the formation of the United

Arab Emirates – in some ways a microcosm of what the GCC could and may yet one day become.

Like no other single factor, Great Britain's decision drove the transition from these polities' protected-state status to national sovereignty and political independence. The process itself marked the ending of two eras and the beginning of two others. In the first, the termination of British hegemony in these entities' external and domestic affairs enabled them to meet, intermingle, and explore the possibilities of a common future together to a greater extent than at any other time in modern history. In the second, Britain's abrogation of its special treaty relationships and obligations cleared the way for the United States to become the pre-eminent military and geo-political power in the Gulf as a whole, a role it has been keen to strengthen and expand ever since.

Additional key historical turning points occurring shortly before the GCC's establishment were three events that occurred in 1979 – the attack on the Grand Mosque in Makkah, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (that led to the rise of Al-Qaeda), and the onset of the Iranian Revolution. Of more recent vintage, the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's 1990 invasion and occupation of Kuwait, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, and 2004 forecasts by some geologists and financial advisers that world oil reserves had either already peaked or would soon do so, contributing, along with the chaos and uncertainties associated with the U.S. invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, to \$60 a barrel.

But the one catalyst that most shaped the founding of the GCC and the need for the United States and other Great Power allies to reformulate their policies towards the GCC region was the overthrow of the government headed by the Shah of Iran in late December 1978. The Shah's replacement by a radical extremist regime marked a major turning point not only in the strategic calculus of Gulf defence but also with regard to the foundation upon which six of the Gulf's member-countries would place their international relations and further economic development. The entire Gulf region thereby entered an era that was at once more uncertain, yet laced with unprecedented possibilities, than any in recent memory.

In the immediate aftermath of the Iranian government's demise, the implications for regional defence and security were uppermost on everyone's minds. Of particular concern was that whereas Iran, along with Saudi Arabia, had served as the larger and more militarily powerful partner in a "twin pillar" strategy to

enhance Gulf peace and stability, the situation soon became one in which the Iranian revolution threatened to spread to Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula.

The outbreak of armed hostilities between Iran and Iraq 19 months later marked the beginning of one of the 20th century's longest wars, 1980-88, and further underscored the potential for greater regional turmoil [[[OR: for greater levels of two kinds of oil, as it were: turmoil and the other kind.]]]. The onset of major armed conflict between these two countries, whose populations and armed forces were both larger than those of all six of the east Arabian countries combined and whose leaders vied with one another to have their country become the paramount power in the Gulf, represented an immediate challenge to regional order and prosperity.

The six Gulf countries that would eventually combine to form the GCC, together with representatives of fellow Arab countries Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, and others, met in Jordan in November, 1980, to ponder how best to respond to the most serious challenge to Gulf defence in modern times. The countries that would establish the GCC resisted the temptation to endorse a particular idea advanced by representatives of other Arab governments. They refused to enter then and there into any formally organised effort to deal with matters of regional defence cooperation as a means of preventing the conflict from spreading to the Arab side of the Gulf. Instead, the Sultan of Oman, backed by the other five Arabian Peninsula monarchies, persuaded his colleagues to postpone any further deliberations about what their collective response might be until they met in Taif, Saudi Arabia, at an OIC summit scheduled for January 1981.

Upon the conclusion of the Taif Summit, the leaders of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) agreed to remain behind and meet among themselves. The purpose was to conduct their own deliberations on how best to proceed cooperatively with a view to preventing the spread of any aspect of the Iran-Iraq war or the Iranian revolution to their countries.

The fact that Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen were not invited to be part of these discussions was interpreted by Baghdad, Amman, and Sana'a as a major geopolitical setback. (Six years later, these three countries, plus Egypt, would form their own sub-regional organisation called the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC). The ACC disbanded shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait, when Egypt, together with the six GCC member-states plus five other Arab countries, sided with Kuwait but Jordan, Yemen, and six other Arab other nations did not).

## **Limited Membership: The Rationale**

The GCC countries' leaders explained their reasons for limiting the organisation's membership to six countries as follows. One, Jordan was not only situated outside the Gulf. Unlike any of the GCC countries at the time, its near-term future was perceived as precarious. The reason was that many Israeli leaders argued, as some still do, that Jordan, not the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, would become the future State of Palestine - it was difficult to envision how such a scenario could be implemented without extensive Arab-Israeli violence and accompanying reverberations likely to be manifested throughout the GCC region.

Two, it was not just that the republican governments of Iraq and Yemen were different in nature and structure from the dynastic forms of governance that bound the GCC countries together. It was also the fact that the regimes in Baghdad and Sana'a had come into existence on the ashes of dynasties similar to those of the GCC countries.

Three, no one denied that the nature of Iraqi, Jordanian, and Yemeni society shared much with the six GCC countries. But in the end, the GCC leaders concluded that their far more common needs, concerns, interests, and their collectively shared objectives warranted the organisation's membership being confined to a smaller and more similarly situated and oriented group of polities.

Similar objections existed alongside additional ones with regard to Iran, which, like Iraq, longed to become the paramount power in the Gulf. Not least among the reasons for distrusting Tehran's objectives was that it showed no signs of dealing in good faith with the UAE. The issue in question was Iran's ongoing occupation of three UAE islands near the Hormuz Strait that it had seized from the Emirates of Ra's Al-Khaimah and Sharjah by force on December 2, 1971

Fourth, in a marked departure from previous Arab attempts at forging a regional organisation, the GCC countries' leaders deliberately agreed to set their collective sights far lower than similar undertakings in other sub-regions. All of the other efforts had failed for having been far too ambitious, unrealistic, and ineffective. Accordingly, with a view to learning lessons from mistakes made in these earlier failed attempts, the GCC's founders were determined to pursue a more modest and limited agenda.

With the reality of a major war being waged literally on their collective doorstep, the founders set the terms for their membership and cooperation - and notably not then either their union or even partial integration - on what all agreed would likely be possible of attainment. For example, they agreed that the GCC's membership would be formed of countries with a common culture, a largely shared history, and a broadly similar set of development challenges and imperatives. One of the most important agreed criteria was that theirs would be grouping composed of countries with similar forms of government.

### **An Abiding Quest: Strengthening Material Wellbeing**

An over-arching strategic objective, beyond the joint quest for preserving their collective governmental status quos, was the promotion of their economic cooperation. To this end, within less than two weeks of their formally inaugurating the GCC on May 28, 1981, at a GCC heads of state summit in Abu Dhabi, the members affixed their signatures to an Economic Unity Agreement. The EUA was more a blueprint for progress than a legally binding document, per se. As such it, provided guidance for their respective economic planning and the enactment as well as harmonization of laws, rules, and regulations designed to facilitate trade and investment between and among the members.

This facet of the GCC's formation and subsequent evolution has long been overlooked by outside observers. Among the latter from the very beginning, an inordinate number has remained fixated upon trying to fathom what the member-countries were doing and not doing with regard to regional defence cooperation. In many ways, certainly from the perspective of Washington and some other foreign capitals, this was and has been understandable. To be sure, the imperative of enhancing the nature, momentum, and extent of their cooperation in defence matters early on was axiomatic in light of the Iran-Iraq war and the Iranian revolution that threatened to spill over into the GCC region itself.

Despite these realities, the founders remained wedded to the belief that their collective endeavours would largely succeed or fail on the basis of whether they helped or hindered the material wellbeing of their citizens. Accordingly, a hallmark of the GCC Secretariat's staff and the focus of the organisation's year round meetings would thenceforth emphasize economic and commercial cooperation. In contrast, it was agreed that matters pertaining to defence cooperation on the whole would best be delegated for debate and decision outside the GCC Secretariat. Indeed, from the beginning, the issues have been

deliberated mainly away from the limelight through the process of regular meetings of their combined armed forces chiefs of staff and their ministers of defence.

### **Leadership, Administration, and Strategic Objectives**

In acknowledgement of the greater and more varied experience that Kuwait had amassed in administering a variety of pan-Arab regional organisations, the members agreed that a Kuwaiti, renowned diplomat Abdallah Y. Bishara, would be the organisation's first secretary-general. Because Saudi Arabia was the one member-state that bordered all the others, in addition to having a defence establishment, oil reserves, oil production, oil exports, an industrial sector, and a population that exceeded that of all the other five countries combined, Riyadh was chosen as the site for the secretariat.

For similarly sound reasons pertaining to rotating the secretariat's leadership among the smaller member-states, lest one country's prominence tend to predominate over the others, the GCC countries have continued to accept and support in all but one instance a non-Saudi Arabian as GCC Secretary-General. The one exception was the immediate past secretary-general, Jamil Ibrahim Al-Hegelan.

### **Intrusion of Extra-Regional Dynamics**

Beginning not long after the GCC was formed, and continuing down to the present, various Israeli policies and actions have impacted negatively on what the GCC members have sought to achieve. What Israel has done to the Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syria people - although living in countries that did not neighbour any of the GCC members - has long reverberated negatively throughout the entire Gulf.

A continuous reason has been that large numbers of citizens from these three countries have lived and worked in several of the GCC countries for decades. Another is that the citizenry of all six GCC countries has long been angered by the many injustices that Israeli policies and actions have inflicted upon their Arab counterparts in the eastern Mediterranean and upon the Palestinians in particular. From the outset, the GCC countries have dedicated significant diplomatic efforts and resources to supporting the Palestinians and Syrians' inherent right to self-preservation and their quest for national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity.

The GCC countries were shocked that the United States did nothing to prevent or reverse the Israeli aggression against Lebanon in 1982. The shock was compounded when Washington failed to prohibit or even proclaim legally null and void Israel's annexation in 1983 of Syria's resource-rich Golan Province that it had occupied by force in June 1967. Throughout the GCC's existence, the member-states' governments would be shocked still further at the American government's professed inability to force the Israeli Defence Forces to cease their occupation of Palestinian territories and their ongoing heavy-handed repression of Palestinian efforts to prevent Israel from continuing to expropriate their land and water.

Washington officialdom's unwillingness to defend the indigenous Palestinian people against Israel's continuing expropriation of their land and water, and the persistence with which it sided with the Israelis financially, militarily, and politically within international organizations, served only to deepen and further the alienation of the overwhelming majority of the GCC peoples. To most observers within the region, it symbolised the United States' self-imposed restraints on its willingness - in the case of Israelis versus Arabs -- to uphold the UN Charter's prohibition against "the acquisition of territory by force."

Regarding Lebanon, the U.S.-forced relocation of the Palestine Liberation Authority to Tunis, the Israeli-assisted massacres at the Palestinian refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, and the Israeli Defence Forces' killing of more than 17,000 mostly civilian Lebanese and Palestinians had a profound impact upon the GCC citizenry's perception of the United States' actual and perceived role in these events. Few in the GCC region and elsewhere in the Arab and Islamic worlds were able to resist questioning the moral credibility and legitimacy of the United States, their major strategic and defence partner, for its seeming complicity or unwillingness to restrain its Israeli ally's transgressions against fundamental Arab Christian and Muslim interests.

The GCC citizenry's disillusionment with these particular aspects of American foreign policy was not confined to a single incident. As the GCC evolved, additional shocks included seeing how Washington, year after year, prevented the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions which the United States and the rest of the UNSC members voted for in demanding that Israel withdraw from Lebanon. It stemmed from the perceived incongruity of American officialdom proclaiming the virtues of democratic ideals, principles, and processes, on one hand, juxtaposed against Washington's repeated insistence, on



the other hand, on vetoing the votes of a majority of its fellow members on the UN Security Council on far more issues than Lebanon that related to Israel. It was further reflected in the nature of the May 1983 US-brokered accord between Israel and Lebanon – through that agreement, Israel derived material and political benefits from its invasion and occupation. In contrast, Lebanon failed to receive either an apology, compensation, or any other benefit despite its having been on the receiving end of the invasion and occupation.

None of this came without negative consequences for either the GCC countries or the United States. Within the GCC region as a whole, the situation quickly became pervasively problematic. It became increasingly difficult for the member-states' leaders to explain, let alone defend, the rationale for their continued close association with a country whose government continuously manifested so little conviction and even less courage to address issues of elemental injustice in the eyes of the GCC peoples. Several important exceptions notwithstanding, the earlier generations-old American image in the GCC region of fairness, respect for international law, and its oft-stated goal of bringing a just, enduring, and comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, were shown to be more hollow than real.

As if issues directly related to the GCC peoples' fellow Arabs in the eastern Mediterranean were not perplexing enough, this was nothing in comparison to what was happening simultaneously closer to home, where the situation worsened. Indeed, from 1984 onwards, the lethality of the Iran-Iraq war accelerated. For one thing, Iran adopted the tactic of attacking international shipping, including oil tankers - eventually attacking the fuel ships of 13 countries - transiting the Gulf. For another, Iranian forces broke through the southernmost Iraqi defence lines, bringing the war nearer than ever before to Kuwait.

In response, the GCC moved to do what no previous Arab regional organisation had done. Its leaders resolved to create a standing army. Composed of troops from each of the member-states, the force never exceeded 12,000 soldiers. At the annual heads of state summit in Kuwait that fall, it was decided that the GCC multinational force would be stationed at Hafr Al-Batin, in Saudi Arabia, not far from the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia border.

Much was made and not made of the efficacy of the GCC's joint defence force known as Arabian Shield. Military scholars the world over derided the paucity of its strength in terms of numbers. Some highlighted the limited degree of

standardization among its constituent units' defence systems and equipment. Others emphasized its minimum level of expertise compared to the armed forces of Iran and Iraq.

Yet outside observers consistently overlooked the overarching purpose of the joint force. It was not so much the idea that it would ever be able to hold its own against one or the other of the far larger and superior fighting forces of Iran and Iraq. Rather, its existence was to serve as a geo-strategic and geopolitical trip wire. To wit, it was meant to underscore, as indeed it did in August 1990 when Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, the principle that an attack on any one GCC state would be interpreted by the members as an attack against all six.

Stripped of the rhetoric surrounding its formation, the force's strategic contribution was to make it easier for the member-states' allies to mobilise and deploy their armed forces to the GCC to reverse any aggression against them. It mattered not whether the ally was China, France, Great Britain, Russia, or the United States. That there was already in place a six-country force that called for their assistance greatly facilitated these Great Powers' ability to come to their defence.

In 1987, as the military phase of the Iran-Iraq conflict began to reach its climax, the GCC countries took two other decisions that had far-reaching consequences. First, Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Iran. It did so in response to a series of Iranian-inspired actions that Riyadh deemed unacceptable. Included among them was extremist behaviour by successive delegations of Iranians participating in the annual Islamic pilgrimage to the holy places in Saudi Arabia and Tehran's repeated statements to the effect that the government of Saudi Arabia was unfit to serve in the role of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques at Makkah and Madinah.

Second, at the November 1987 GCC heads of state summit in Riyadh, the GCC countries in effect endorsed unanimously the steps that Kuwait had taken to accept an American commitment to ensure their protection - in this instance, by hoisting the American flag atop maritime vessels bound to and from Kuwait, thereby signalling its determination to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Gulf as a whole. This was the first time in modern history that sovereign and independent Arab countries had endorsed foreign military protection.

## **Economic and Political Fallout from The Iran-Iraq War**

The major spike in international oil prices as a result of the extended unrest in Iran immediately before, during, and following the Iranian revolution, proved short-lived. GCC-USA economic and commercial relations had evolved to an all-time high as a result of the GCC countries' greatly augmented revenues following the 1973 oil embargo. However, starting in 1983, fluctuations in oil prices helped cause all six GCC economies to slow measurably from then onwards. The effect was to produce annual deficits that would continue straight through until the upswing in oil and gas prices from 2002 onwards.

June 8, 1982 marked a fundamental shift in U.S. military and political strategy towards the conflict. On that day, Iran's armed forces were finally able to eject Iraqi troops from Iranian soil. In so doing, they crossed the Shatt al-Arab waterway boundary between Iran and Iraq and proceeded to attack Iraq from inside Iraq. From that moment forward, the United States changed tactics and began to support Iraq. Indeed, by the beginning of 1984, the United States had re-established diplomatic relations with Iraq, which had been severed in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Within the GCC region, as elsewhere, this helped to restore some of the loss in American prestige as a result of its less than adequate response to Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon. However, the benefits would be substantially vitiated two years later when there came to light yet another indication of Washington's inability to make a defining difference in dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, in November 1986, in the middle of a GCC annual heads of state summit held in Abu Dhabi, the US-Iran-Israel-Contragate scandal was exposed.

The White House was revealed as having allowed Israel to sell advanced American manufactured aviation and other defence equipment to Tehran in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war then raging. This act alone practically guaranteed that the war would be prolonged indefinitely. Worse, the US was caught providing arms to Iran, the one party to the Iran-Iraq conflict that refused to enter negotiations with a view to achieving a ceasefire. The resulting dismay among America's GCC Arab allies was more than profound; it dealt the greatest blow to US credibility in the eyes of the GCC countries in history.

The acceleration of the tanker war from late 1986 onwards provided the United States with an unexpected but welcomed opportunity. It offered Washington a

chance to repair the damage that its perceived perfidy had dealt the GCC-US relationship in its arms-to-Iran-for-hostages scandal. Indeed, nine months after that unprecedented debacle, the United States managed to reverse itself when, at Kuwait's request, it placed the American flag on oil tankers transiting the Gulf to and from Kuwait.

Simultaneously, Washington mounted a naval escort operation to ensure that if Iran attacked any ship flying the stars and stripes it would be dealt with severely. Code-named Operation Ernest Will by the US Navy, the exercise did much to restore the GCC member-states' confidence in America's commitment to uphold the region's governmental status quo. The operation helped speed the conflict to an earlier end. In so doing, it prevented both the war and the Iranian revolution from spreading to the GCC region.

In the second measure, the GCC countries welcomed, for the first time, a large delegation of observers from Egypt to attend that year's GCC heads of state summit in Riyadh. In so doing, they helped paved the way for Egypt's re-entry into a role in pan-Arab regional affairs – dormant since Egypt, in retaliation for what it failed to achieve in the 1978 Camp David Accords with Israel, was expelled from the 22-member League of Arab States and the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference. Egypt's regional leadership role had been eclipsed not so much for its having signed the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel. Rather, it resulted from the accord's failure to achieve anything of benefit to the Palestinians remaining under Israeli occupation, and its failure to address the question of Jerusalem, the third holiest city to more than a billion Muslims worldwide. For these acts of omission, the League of Arab States not only expelled Egypt from its ranks but moved the League's capital from Cairo to Tunis.

No sooner had the December 1987 GCC summit concluded, however, than Palestinians living in the Israeli-occupied territories, despairing of seeing any meaningful prospects to improve their plight, launched the Intifada [a shaking off] Uprising in an effort to end the Israeli occupation. But yet again, the United States did little to dissuade the Israeli government from continuing its heavy-handed repression of unarmed and ill-armed protesters against the occupation. As a result, America's moral and political standing in terms of the hearts and minds of the GCC peoples and their counterparts throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds plummeted once again.

## **The Origins of Pan-GCC Economic and Political Reform**

The November 1989 GCC heads of state summit in Muscat, Oman, marked yet another watershed in the GCC's evolution. The United States and most other Western countries applauded Omani Ruler Sultan Qaboos' placement on the summit agenda the need for the GCC member-states to embark on a series of domestic political, economic, and social reforms. The timing was seemingly auspicious. It came immediately after the overthrow of governments in Central and Eastern Europe as the Soviet Union itself was beginning to dissolve.

This initiative predated by nearly a decade and half the launching by the United States of its Middle East Partnership Initiative and its companion campaign, the Foundation for the Future Fund, introduced in the fall of 2005. In the Omani Ruler's view at the time, the challenge in front of the member-states could not be clearer. In his view, the GCC leaders had no choice but to do whatever was necessary to protect the manifold gains they had accomplished in their first decade.

Doing so, Qaboos argued, would entail the member-states' putting into place mechanisms that would enable them to defend the GCC peoples' contemporary and future interests. To this end, he argued that all of the members from that point forward should do whatever was necessary to narrow the gap between GCC governors and governed. Otherwise, he contended, meddlesome and expansion-minded outsiders would seek to undermine the member-countries' national stability and development processes.

In the intervening decade and a half since that 1989 summit, virtually all of the GCC countries except the UAE have conducted one or more national elections. And in late 2005, the UAE declared that it would soon conduct elections for members of the Federal Legislative Council, whose members, since 1971, have all been appointed. Indeed, in December 2006, the UAE's citizens are scheduled to go to the ballot boxes for the first time. In addition, building on a tradition of having elections for the member-states' chambers of commerce, the atmosphere became more receptive and the political moment more propitious for the further development of what had previously been a limited network of civil society organizations. To this end, there was a marked increase in the establishment of non-government organizations serving the business and professional needs of engineers, lawyers, doctors, accountants, women's associations, the handicapped and disabled, and youth groups, among others – such entities were viewed as potentially ideal mechanisms for further accelerating the nature and extent of

popular participation in the member-states' political and national development processes. A particularly important breakthrough was the extent to which women in most of the GCC countries obtained the right to vote, to run as candidates and be elected, and to serve as cabinet ministers and ambassadors as well as elected members of the boards of directors of the region's leading chambers of commerce and industry.

In many instances, the United States, together with international organizations specializing in the promotion of democratization, voter registration, election campaigning and financing, and a host of other skills and functions associated with constitutional development and electoral systems, played low profile roles as advisers and consultants.

### **The Impetus for Defence Cooperation Agreements**

The dynamism associated with these and related developments on the reform front aside, no one at the time could have known that this new strategic approach to bolstering the GCC region's defence and domestic stability would be put to such an early test. Representing a more serious and potentially devastating threat to the GCC than the Iran-Iraq war, a major challenge to the GCC's effectiveness erupted on August 2, 1990. On that day, Saddam Hussein ordered units of his armed forces into Kuwait, declaring it thenceforth as Iraq's 19th Province.

With one of their fellow members having thereby been literally erased from the map, the GCC governments were hard pressed to determine how best to respond. Yet, to their credit and the surprise of many the world over, the GCC leaders were not found wanting in their response and resolve. The very next day, all six GCC foreign ministers convened in Cairo with their fellow ministers from 15 other Arab League members.

There the GCC countries were able to double their number and thereby help secure a 12 to 9 vote in the League of Arab States in the passage of two historic resolutions. On August 3, they succeeded in persuading six other Arab countries to join them in condemning the Iraqi attack and calling for Iraq to withdraw its forces from Kuwait. On August 10, the GCC countries prevailed again in persuading the same six countries to join them in enacting an unprecedented resolution calling upon all Arab League members to mobilize and deploy their armed forces to Saudi Arabia. Only thus, they reasoned, would there be a means of deterring the Iraqi military from expanding the war to other GCC countries.

At the same time, on another strategic front, the GCC member-states' OPEC representatives met in Vienna. There, in the face of adamant Iraqi opposition, they persuaded a majority to authorize raising the level of the members' oil production immediately. In one fell swoop, they were not only able to compensate for the combined sales of 4.6mbd of oil from Iraq and Kuwait that the UN Security Council declared would henceforth be prohibited. They were also able to remove from the Iraqi arsenal a tactic that Saddam Hussein had counted on to pressure otherwise indecisive countries not to oppose Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

In retrospect what is clear is that in pondering the appropriate course of action, the GCC countries may have been outmanned and out-gunned by the Iraqi armed forces. However, they were certainly not out-foxed. In the two favourable resolutions passed in Cairo, a third in OPEC, a fourth in the UN Security Council, a fifth in the Organisation of African Unity, and a sixth in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the GCC countries were able to reap the benefits of all their previous diplomatic efforts at cultivating a large and diverse network of international supporters.

In so doing, the GCC countries effectively trumped Saddam Hussein's claims that the Arab and other international response to Iraq's taking Kuwait would be tepid at best. In answer to Baghdad's boast that no Arab or Islamic country would dare defy what his forces had done to Kuwait, the GCC countries, together with the internationally concerted coalition formed to reverse the aggression, proved the exact opposite.

Moreover, the member-states ended up hosting more than half a million men and women of the US armed forces, and additional military units from nearly three dozen other nations, deployed to the GCC region to help liberate Kuwait. The member-states also took in another several hundred thousand Kuwaitis who fled the Iraqi invasion. Further, they provided the fuel and financial resources requisite to the restoration of peace, safety, and stability to Kuwait and the Kuwaiti people. Simultaneously, they upheld the principles of the UN Charter's inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force and the Vienna Convention regarding the safety and protection of diplomatic and consular officers.

On March 6, 1991, with the dust not yet settled from the reversal of Iraq's aggression, then US President George H.W. Bush addressed a joint session of the United States Congress. A key emphasis of his remarks was a call for the

establishment of New World Order. On the exact same day, and not by coincidence, the six GCC Foreign Ministers, together with their counterparts from Egypt and Syria, convened in Damascus. They did so with a view to proclaiming the foundations of a New Regional Order. Such an order was intended to replace the one that had existed de facto since the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel that was shattered when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

In the years immediately following the restoration of freedom, order, safety, and stability to the Kuwait people, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE all became joint signatories with the United States in separate bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs). Oman, more than ten years earlier, had entered into a Defence Access Agreement with the United States. The DCAs included the following provisions. Each of the GCC signatory countries would allow the United States to pre-position military equipment within its territory. The purpose would be to enhance the effectiveness of potential defence contingencies requiring its utilisation. The agreements also provided for regular consultation on and exchange of defence-related information as well as the periodic holding of joint training exercises and field manoeuvres. Saudi Arabia, although alone among the GCC members not to sign a DCA, remained host to American, and to a lesser extent British and French, military advisers. Of these, the Americans and French conducted daily air sorties over southern Iraq - Operation Southern Watch. They did so to ensure that the Iraqi government did not resume its oppression of Iraqis in the area extending from Baghdad southward to the city of Basra and the Gulf coast.

### **The March Towards Economic Liberalisation and Globalisation**

Throughout much of the 1990s, the GCC and the United States held a series of GCC-US Economic and Commercial Dialogues involving key representatives of their respective public and private sectors. These were convened on an alternating basis in Washington and one of the GCC countries. The purpose was to narrow misunderstandings, eliminate barriers to trade and investment, enhance the alignment of their respective systems of standards, weights, and measures, and in general strengthen the foundation for future cooperation and the generation of wealth in their respective private sectors.

Although these dialogues ceased to exist following the September 2001 attacks against the United States, this did not translate into a lack of forward movement by the GCC on trade and investment issues in other ways. Indeed, from the mid-1990s onwards, one GCC country after another gained accession to the World



Trade Organisation. Saudi Arabia, in December 2005, was the last to join, being admitted after 12 years of complex negotiations. Preceding its admission, the kingdom enacted nearly a dozen economic reform measures. Included were more than 40 new laws, rules, and regulations pertaining to foreign investment, subsidies, tariffs, capital markets, real estate, agencies, and distributorships, and much else.

The rest of the GCC countries and the capitals of most other countries, including the United States, heralded the kingdom's accession to the WTO. It was seen as a means of providing a greatly enhanced rules-based framework for world interaction with the GCC's largest economy and market, one whose annual oil reserves, production, exports, and revenues as well as private capital exceeded that of all the other five member-states combined.

But in the midst of these kinds of breakthroughs on the commercial front for most of the GCC countries, in 1998, they suffered a major financial blow - the international price for petroleum fell briefly below ten dollars. For a brief period, it looked as though the member-states were headed for perhaps their worst economic setback in almost a generation. Not least among their additional concerns was the increasing tendency of the major American and other Western multinational oil companies to look elsewhere for sources of energy: namely, in the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea region, and West Africa.

In a bold move to counter this trend as it pertained to the largest GCC oil producer and exporter, Saudi Arabia's then Crown Prince Abdallah held a private meeting in Washington that September with the chief executives of all of America's most prominent oil firms. The purpose was to explore the prospects for reengaging their expertise in the Kingdom's quest to further the development of its gas, but not oil sector.

For the next two years, the American companies engaged in a major effort to win concessions to develop one or more of several regions believed to contain substantial deposits of gas. Ultimately, for reasons of very competitive pricing bids presented by major oil companies from other countries, the American efforts were outbid by the competition. Indeed, the contracts announced in 2004 were won instead mainly by Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and French firms.

Many outside observers interpreted these developments as a strategic shift by Saudi Arabia away from its previous long and intimate association with the American corporate energy giants. The kingdom's officials, however, maintained

the contrary. They insisted that the Americans had the exact same access as everyone else to the technical data upon which bids were formulated and submitted. What happened was that the American bids were significantly higher than those of the other companies. Whether there will be significant long-term strategic consequences for the Saudi-US relationship as a result of these developments remained to be seen.

In the interim, despite its failure to win new concessions in the GCC's largest energy sector, it looked as though the United States would be able to continue holding its own as a major player in GCC-wide policymaking with regard to the energy component of their individual and collective relationships with Washington. One major reason was the heightened concern throughout the GCC region of the damage done to regional peace and stability in the chaos that followed the American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Another was deep awareness of how the member-states' American-centric defence systems, technology, equipment, pre-positioned weaponry, and strategic as well as tactical doctrine gave them little in the way of alternatives as to direction.

These factors necessitated that the member-countries do whatever they could to enhance the GCC region's defence. More than that, they agreed that they had no choice but to do everything necessary to maintain their strategic, economic, political, commercial, defence, and developmental interests with the United States, the primary external guarantor of their defence against foreign attack or intimidation.

Similarly, on the American side, there was widespread and increased awareness of the crucial position and role of the GCC countries in matters of global importance. Indeed, few questioned how the defence, peace, and stability of the GCC countries remained vital to the security of international energy supplies, production levels, oil refineries and refined products, price stability, economic growth, and the material wellbeing not only of the United States and its allies but of most of humanity.

### **Strains on The Goodwill Front**

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the United States, on one hand, and Saudi Arabia, from whom 15 of the hijackers had come, together with the other GCC countries, on the other hand, entered into a prolonged period of denial and counter-accusations. In the United States, public opinion in the Congress, the media, and at the grassroots level, accused

not only Saudi Arabia of malfeasance. By implication they levelled accusatory fingers at large portions of the Arab and Islamic worlds in general. The specific charges were that too many of these countries were guilty of supporting terrorism, financing and harbouring militant extremists, and condoning religious sermons and educational texts that served to incite acts of violence against the West, Christians, Jews, and the United States.

In the midst of Washington officialdom's horror at what had happened, the US Congress passed the Patriot Act. The blandness of its language aside, the legislative measure was interpreted throughout the GCC region and elsewhere in the Arab and Islamic worlds as one of the cornerstones in the legalistic framework behind the United States' declared global war against terrorism.

Citizens throughout the GCC region recoiled in shock at this unanticipated American lurch towards bellicosity and jingoism. Among the manifold consequences was, on the one hand, a precipitous decline in the number of Arab and Muslim students from the GCC region studying in the United States. Key American economic sectors that had previously long been patronized by GCC and other Arabs were dealt setbacks. Examples were the fall in Arab tourism to the United States, visits to American hospitals, the contracting of U.S.-based health care services, and Arab purchasing of real estate in the United States. In addition, American investment and interest in the region waned, the number of Americans living and working in the GCC countries plummeted, and the number of delegations in either direction seeking to explore the possibilities for expanding business decreased.

On the other hand, parallel to these events the GCC member-states, the United States, and other countries found it in their respective national security and defence interests to cooperate selectively in matters of common concern. An example was their cooperation in the American-led intervention against the Taliban government and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Both sides were united in responding to Afghanistan's having played a key role in providing sanctuary and training for large numbers of terrorists following the end of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-1988 in general and, in particular, with regard to the attacks against the United States in September 2001.

### **Bilateral Free Trade Agreements**

On the eve of the December 2004 GCC Heads of State Summit in Bahrain, Bahrain announced its intention to enter into a bilateral trade agreement with the

United States. Soon afterwards, Oman and Qatar signified that, following their conclusion of separate Trade and Investment Framework Agreements with the United States, they, too, intended to enter into bilateral free trade agreements with Washington.

In 2005, as the momentum quickened for the GCC's commemoration of its 25th anniversary and the annual summit to be held in Abu Dhabi December 18-19, there were conflicting signs of the extent to which the previously dynamic and mutually beneficial relationships between the GCC countries and the United States had been harmed. On the one hand, practically no one in the GCC region took issue with the fact that Saddam Hussein was overthrown. On the other hand, nearly everyone was appalled by the consequences flowing from what, all agreed, were countless examples of poor planning by the United States with regard to the social chaos and widespread political hostility against the occupation that erupted after the invasion. High on the list of what disturbed GCC leaders greatly were Washington's having countenanced a radical, profound, and far-reaching reconfiguration of Iraq's system of governance, its increasingly bellicose rhetoric aimed at Iran and Syria, and, inter alia, the continuance of bloodshed and instability as well as the building of what had every indication of being permanent US military bases - de facto American strategic outposts - in Iraq that showed no sign of early abatement.

On the other hand, there were also positive signs. Among these was growing evidence that perhaps the worst of the American public's animus towards the region's Arabs and Muslims had passed, although the tempo of the steady drumbeat in Washington of finding ways to lessen the reliance upon GCC and other foreign energy resources actually increased.

By mid-2005, moreover, there were signs that the defence cooperation component of the relationships, far from unravelling, not only remained largely in tact but showed signs of strengthening. In addition, GCC students had begun to return to the United States in ever-increasing numbers despite the ongoing onerous administrative obstacles associated with the difficulties that students encountered when they tried to obtain visas for entry into the United States to launch or resume their studies. Together with a strengthening of American and GCC economic and commercial interests, these several positive developments gave reason to believe that the material ties between the GCC countries and the United States, if not also their political and public relations, stood a good chance of improving.

## US Interests in the GCC

The major US interests in the GCC region have long been and remain strategic, economic, political, commercial, defence, and cultural/people-to-people:

- Strategic - matters pertaining to war and peace, and security and stability.
- Economic – apart from matters pertaining to price or production, unfettered access to the region's prodigious sources of oil and gas.
- Political - reaching and sustaining common ground on strategic, economic, and commercial as well as defence matters, inclusive of terrorism, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Mid-East peace process, globalisation, and reformist measures.
- Commercial - trade and investment as well as the establishment of joint business ventures, trade and investment framework agreements, and free trade accords, as well as the entry of Saudi Arabia into the World Trade Organisation;

[Note: From World War II until the mid-1970s, US economic and commercial interests were seen as existing largely in the same category in terms of analysis, planning and strategy. Following the 1973 oil embargo, or rather following its end in mid-March 1974, the two have been separate ever since.

Whereas the economic interest since then has been defined solely as maintaining assured access to the region's oil and gas supplies - much like a drug addict's need for guaranteed sources of heroin or whatever, regardless of price - the commercial interest has been defined and pursued differently. On one hand, the United States increasingly sought the promotion of American exports of goods and services that generate tax revenues to offset, even if only partially, the increasingly high energy import expense. On the other hand, the United States tried to attract GCC and other Arab investments in US government monetary instruments. These were seen as one means, among others, of the United States being able to pay for everything from social welfare entitlements and defence equipment to government salaries and even school children's lunches.

- Defence - US-GCC country access and defence cooperation agreements, consensual military undertakings and understandings, and the maintenance and security of pre-positioned equipment; the periodic conducting of joint manoeuvres, unity of vision as to interoperability regarding overall procurement, mix of weaponry, and logistics; similarity if not basic sameness of strategic military and tactical doctrine, parallel

participation in the same year-round defence exhibitions; and heightened de facto cooperation and determination of role differentiations with NATO countries.

- Cultural/People-To-People Ties - continuance and where possible the expansion of GCC-US educational exchanges, English language training, harmonisation of weights and measures, adoption and application of common standards and specifications.

## **Free Trade**

The near-term trend, as a result of US official preference and pressure, on the one hand, and overall receptivity by most of the GCC governments, on the other hand, has increasingly been to move forward via the conclusion and implementation of bilateral free trade agreements. This has presented challenges not only to the previous American willingness to accept a multilateral approach, an approach the United States has adopted in its relationships with the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] and the European Union [EU], but not the GCC. It has also underscored the differences between the United States' efforts to place its commercial relations with the GCC countries on a firmer foundation for the future, and the European Union and GCC's longer attempts, dating from 1987, to negotiate a free trade accord between their respective economic blocs.

The GCC, from the beginning, has seen considerable merit in its potential to negotiate with its most important trading partners as a bloc. The purpose would be to benefit from economies of scale, minimal duplication of effort and redundancy of trading systems, and concentration of administrative effort as one economic unit, one market, one customs union, and, eventually, one currency.

In order to reach their full economic and commercial potential, the GCC's leaders are agreed that they need to introduce further reforms and structural adjustments to their economies. Many financial advisers and investment strategists believe that only thus will they be better able to address the economic challenges facing the region as globalisation continues apace. Of particular importance in this regard have been monetary policies within the GCC, the encouragement of capital flows among Gulf states, the maintenance of high international standards and specifications pertaining to technology and scientific measurements, and the introduction of strategies to promote integration and development of capital markets and financial services, transparency and corporate governance. On the GCC's 25th anniversary, all of these measures are

being undertaken and implemented region-wide, with variations in terms of speed and extent.

## **Defence & Security**

Defence sales to Saudi Arabia, having already declined in the years since then-Crown Prince Abdallah assumed the role of de facto head of state in November 1995, slowed still further in the aftermath of 9-11. Qatar, however, replaced Saudi Arabia as the forward deployed in-region headquarters of the United States Central Command, with its Area of Responsibility encompassing more than 30 GCC, Fertile Crescent, Levantine, Nile Valley, East African, and South as well as Central Asian countries.

Oman, moreover, made a major strategic decision to purchase advanced F-16 US-manufactured fighter aircraft, lessening its long reliance on mainly British-manufactured fighter aircraft. Kuwait continued to allow the United States and other Allied Coalition forces use of its territory as a warehouse for pre-positioned defence equipment and, in March 2003, when Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched, as a staging ground for military operations in Iraq.

Bahrain continued to host the US Fifth Fleet as well as the naval component of the United States Central Command. And the UAE continued to integrate into its air force American-built F-16 fighter aircraft. In addition, all six GCC countries heightened the level of their discussions with NATO and the latter's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative with a view to exploring the possibilities of further cooperation alongside the United States, Great Britain, and France in yet to be determined categories of defence.

### **Strengthening the US-GCC Relationship: US initiatives**

The range of US initiatives aimed at strengthening the US-GCC relationship has lessened in some areas and advanced in others. For example, one of the fallouts from 9/11 was the virtual cessation of the previous pan-GCC-US dialogue regarding trade cooperation noted earlier. In addition, whereas the 1990s were a period of fairly robust American trade expansion in the GCC region as a whole, the nature, pace, and extent of commercial cooperation from the last half of the 1990s onwards attenuated considerably - American and other foreign investment was increasingly directed towards Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with only Africa receiving less emphasis, as the 21st century began.

It was the abrupt upswing in prices for oil and gas from 2002 onwards, coupled with the GCC countries' irreplaceable role at the centre of world energy markets that began to turn the situation around so quickly. The results were promising. As the GCC marks its 25th anniversary, it appears that the economic and commercial components of GCC-US relations, if not to the same extent the political and people-to-people dimensions of the relationship, stands a good chance of being revived to the benefit of both sides.

A different way of looking at the range and efficacy of US initiatives aimed at strengthening the overall US-GCC relationship is to compare such initiatives with those of the European Union. From the outset, it was apparent that the EU countries were in some ways far more interested than the United States in reaching a free trade accord with the GCC members.

Among the reasons were the fact that, collectively, the volume and value of EU-GCC commerce was twice the level of US-GCC trade; the EU economies were substantially more reliant upon GCC energy exports for their economic growth; and the land, maritime, and air routes between the two regions were both shorter in length and time in addition to being more effective in terms of transporting goods and services. It was also the case that the Europeans on the whole had a far longer history of engagement with and knowledge and understanding of the GCC countries and their peoples as well as development needs. Moreover, their national decision-making processes were not nearly as constrained as those of the United States in terms of a range of domestic political dynamics. The latter made it exceptionally difficult for American leaders to act with the courage of their convictions in doing whatever was necessary to forge the closest relationships possible between the GCC and the United States.

Even so, in addition to wanting to capitalise on these and other EU-GCC advantages, the GCC itself and its member countries aspired to have as close and beneficial a relationship with the United States as possible. The reason was not only because the United States was a superpower, although for many countries that would be justification enough. It was also because the GCC economies denominated their exports in US dollars, much of their energy-related science and technology was American-manufactured and maintained, and many thousands of GCC professional personnel in the public and private sectors had received their higher education at American universities. In addition, the GCC countries, like most other nations, wanted to benefit from the increasingly important strategic and leadership roles of the United States in regional and world affairs as well as international organisations.



Yet for reasons owing more than anything else to the constraints of American domestic political realities - the Israeli lobby's insistence, in effect, that the United States should have but one wife, Israel, and no other in the Middle East - Washington's priorities were different. Indeed, US officials were often slow and noncommittal in their responses to various GCC proposals for strengthening the relationship.

One particular GCC objective was for both sides to forge and staff better mechanisms for dialogue whereby the two partners could meet and discuss regularly any and all issues of interest and concern to each other. For the better part of a decade, there was a limited measure of success in this regard in the form of the annual GCC-US Economic and Commercial Dialogues discussed earlier. In these, the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee and sister nongovernmental organisations such as the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and the National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, on the American side, and the Federation of GCC Chambers of Commerce and Industry, on the GCC side, played supportive roles.

However even these fledgling attempts to regularise a dialogue between the two sides on matters of trade, finance, and investment proved unsustainable. Indeed, from the American side, they ceased altogether in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 2001. Instead, in a move that could not have more vividly demonstrated the extent to which the GCC wished to place the foundation of the member countries' ties with their most important [Western] non-Arab friends, allies, and strategic as well as trading partners on as firm a basis as possible, the GCC opted to become an unofficial member but active participant in the periodic Euro-Med dialogues – this despite the fact that the GCC countries were a member of neither region.

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As the GCC commemorates its 25th anniversary, Americans no less than others from outside the region, on the one hand, and GCC nationals, on the other hand, have ample reason to reflect on what the two sides, in cooperation with one another, have accomplished over the previous two and a half decades. That they have been pivotal actors in the internationally concerted action to end the Iran-Iraq war, prevent the Iranian revolution from spreading across the Gulf, bringing about the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, reversing Iraq's

aggression against Kuwait, and toppling the Taliban government in Afghanistan, are, by any standard of measurement, achievements of no small moment.

That the GCC-U.S. strategic and defence relationship has helped to ensure that, with the exception of when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, not a single GCC barrel of oil promised to a foreign customer failed to be delivered throughout this entire period, thereby enabling many countries to grow their economies, has been a joint contribution to global economic wellbeing that needs no elaboration.

That the GCC countries, the United States, and other regional and Great Powers working together have been able to disprove the near certainty of viewpoint from the 1950s through the 1970s and beyond that the traditional forms of government that the GCC countries represented would be overthrown and discarded is something that not even the boldest forecaster of future events in the region would have been willing to wager when the GCC began.

That these last and foremost amongst what until a generation ago were the most forgotten corners of Arabia have been able, with the assistance of their friends, allies, and strategic partners such as the United States, Great Britain, and others to maintain a degree of unprecedented stability and domestic security in the midst of not one but three major wars on their collective doorstep has to be seen for what it is: probably a historical first. Certainly, one would be hard pressed to cite the survival of another six geographically contiguous countries, neighbouring two other states as large, populous, and militarily strong as Iran and Iraq, but for the protection afforded them by the United States and other Great Powers.

And that these six polities, accustomed as they were during the heyday of pan-Arabism, Arab brotherhood and sisterhood, and Arab unity to being referred to as “America’s and Great Britain’s Arabs,” together with other unprintable pejorative epithets, were nonetheless able to forge the modern Arab world’s single longest successful experiment in regional cooperation is its own testimony not only to the vision and wisdom of the GCC’s founders but to the judgments they made as to whom among the world’s Great Powers they would align their international relations more closely than others.

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