

National  
Council  
on US-  
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Relations

GOALS IN THE GULF:  
AMERICA'S INTERESTS AND  
THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

*by*

*John Duke Anthony*

National  
Council  
Reports

Number 3  
March 1985

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Cost of Publication: \$1.00  
Bulk Rates Available

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During the past two months, following a six week lull, Iraq has renewed its attacks on oil tankers entering Iranian maritime territory and Iran has joined in the fray with its own attacks on foreign vessels. The potential for escalation in the violence raises new challenges to important American interests which need to be addressed.

For a period of six months, as the Gulf War threatened for the first time to have a serious impact on the stability and security of the oil flow, the United States did nothing. In part, this immobility was a function of the unraveling disaster in Lebanon and the continuing problems in Central America, which together absorbed a disproportionate share of attention. In part, it was also a result of the reluctance--a legacy of Vietnam, reinforced by Lebanon--to become involved in a shooting war, especially in an election year.

But in large part Washington has remained little more than a concerned observer, the Reagan Administration reflecting genuine uncertainty about the degree of public and Congressional support for greater action to diminish the growing threat to American interests in the area. There continues to be little appreciation of the danger to the economies of our Western allies and Japan and the subsequent possible ramifications of that development for our own financial health.

The magnitude of the threat has been hidden by foggy thinking. Such thinking has made little of the fact that the threat to the Gulf oil flow poses serious dangers for the economic, social, political, and military strength of the West.

We are told there is an oil glut. We are told the U.S. imports little oil from the Gulf. We are told stockpiles are high. We are told that Iraq and Iran could continue to pound away at each other's oil installations for the indefinite future, and that few, if any Americans, would be inconvenienced as a consequence. To a degree, all these claims are true.

But there's another side to the story, a side that's not being told even though its implications for important American interests are equally obvious and far more ominous. In brief, it is about what could happen in the event the

war should expand across the Gulf to the region's other oil producers--i.e. the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries-- as it has come close to doing on several occasions. Ask any Gulf oil industry executive, regardless of nationality, and he will admit that all other producers combined could not compensate for a complete cutoff of Gulf oil. And without Gulf oil, they will also concede, consumers would have no choice but to compete for what is left.

While U.S. government stockpiles remain high, America's commercial reserves have fallen. The result is hardly comforting. The truth is quite simple: the loss of Gulf oil to international commerce over an extended period would negate the very premises upon which our complacency is built.

The result would be nothing less than economic chaos. It would mean a return to rampant inflation. The recession would deepen. Unemployment would skyrocket. And these are but the mildest of terms to describe the consequences of a truly prolonged disruption in supply.

What to do? The first order of priority is to underscore a few facts with respect to the nature of the threats at hand. Currently, there are three kinds of oil-related threats in the Gulf. The first threat is to the transport of oil. The second is to the oil installa-

tions. The third is to the oil producers. Currently, only the first threat is active. All three, however, must be considered.

To protect the oil transport there are two options. One is for the air forces of the GCC countries--Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman--to assume this responsibility. The second is for the Western states, in which case the principal burden would be borne by the U.S., to do it through their own air and naval assets.

There are several reasons to favor the first option and not the second. Not the least is that it would be at no cost to the U.S. taxpayer. It would be far less escalatory. It would deny the Soviets a pretext for intervening in the area themselves. And it would be far less likely to induce terrorist attacks on other Western positions.

Yet, if the GCC countries are to shoulder the burden of protecting oil transport and other navigation for all the Gulf nonbelligerents, and for the oil-consuming world beyond their borders as well, there is little chance of their being able to do this credibly if they are denied the means to do so. To be sure, the F-15s already in Saudi Arabia's inventory have the capability of protecting that country's oil installations and sea lanes. But the Kingdom is only one among six Gulf states threatened by a possible

spillover from the fighting. An augmented defense which covers all the GCC countries is urgently needed.

The second threat--to the oil installations themselves--requires substantially improved air defense capabilities. It also requires enhanced physical security at these sensitive sites. To do anything less, risks seeing explosive-laden vehicles once more bounce past barricades in deliverance of death to Americans and others in the region.

The transfer on an emergency basis of Stinger shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia last Spring was a prudent first step. That move needs to be followed, however, by a thorough and systematic improvement of air and naval defense preparedness in and around all of the GCC region's major oil facilities. Particularly critical in this regard is the need for better integration and coordination of radar and other detection devices.

Finally, together with our NATO partners and the Arab Gulf states, we must on a priority basis undertake systematic planning and preparation for improved and coordinated regional military, air, and naval defense. Each of the major Western allies and every one of the GCC countries has an important contribution to make. All have much to gain.

To protect American interests, there is no need for the U.S. to assume responsibility for local defense planning and readiness. But we can, should, and must be prepared to assist the six GCC countries whose security is so directly and immediately tied to our own well-being.

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JOHN DUKE ANTHONY, President of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, writes frequently on the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

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