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## U.S. - GCC Security Relations, I: Differing Threat Perceptions

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### Differing Threat Perceptions

Support for Washington's tough containment policy toward Iraq and Iran remains strong at top leadership levels in the Gulf. However, among educated elites and the man in the street, it is softer. The distance in views between the government and the populace on security concerns may be widening. In Saudi Arabia, there is a widespread view that Saudi Arabia (as distinct from Kuwait) was not threatened by Iraq in October 1994. In this view, Saddam's mobilization on the border was designed to call attention to Iraq's sanctions plight, and the United States over-reacted.

Among the educated elite in the GCC states, sympathy for the Iraqi people is strong. So too are fears that continued sanctions, while failing to remove Saddam, could turn the Iraqi populace against the Gulf states that support sanctions. Conspiracy theories accuse the United States of keeping Saddam in power, or at least doing little to remove him, while using the Iraqi threat to strip the Arab Gulf states of their wealth through purchases of unnecessary military hardware. The idea that the United States has used the Iraqi threat to acquire a monopoly of military sales to the Gulf is widespread. More disturbing is growing anti-American sentiment, especially in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where the the oil industry and the U.S. military are concentrated. Educated Arabs are beginning to blame the United States, with its strong military presence in the Gulf, for bolstering governments open to charges of corruption and maldistribution of wealth and perceived as suppressing even modest dissent.

In Kuwait, the threat posed by Saddam was taken seriously. At the level of popular opinion, the idea that all Iraqis have designs on Kuwait is frequently repeated. Among elites, however, there are more diverse

views of Iraq. Some are trying to make contact with exiled Iraqis in the Middle East with a view to preparing for future normalization. A tiny minority even favor a lifting of sanctions, on the grounds that sanctions are strengthening Saddam and prolonging his rule while turning the population against the Gulf states that support it.

Most GCC states see Iran, not Iraq, as the long term threat (a position closer to that of the United States), and do not want Iraq weakened as a balance against Iran (a position more at variance with the United States). This position is particularly strong at the foot of the Gulf, where the UAE and Oman worry about the long term intentions of Iran. Tehran has been asserting itself more vigorously in Gulf waters. In the last few years, Iran has acquired a range of sea lane denial capabilities. There have been some episodes over U.S. inspections, pursuant to the Iraq embargo, of ships stopping in Iranian ports.

Most importantly, Iran upset the 20 year old agreement with the UAE about shared rights on the disputed islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs. In late 1994 and early 1995, Iran moved a heavy military presence onto Abu Musa, including artillery and several thousand troops. GCC states often compare Iranian actions on Abu Musa and the two Tunbs to Saddam's attack on Kuwait. Many GCC citizens want U.S. support for their position that the islands belong to the UAE.

At the same time, however, GCC states are wary of the U.S. "Dual Containment" policy toward Iran because they are concerned it may antagonize Iranian leaders. Heightened U.S. rhetoric and active U.S. measures, like trade sanctions and boycotts, stir alarm over potential military confrontation. The emirate of Dubai in the UAE, which exercises a large measure of independence from the federal UAE government that is largely dominated by the emirate of Abu Dhabi, would prefer a more subtle approach to Iran, with which Dubai has substantial trade, financial and personal ties. These ambiguities indicate unclear and conflicting threat perceptions, as well as the traditional bias of Gulf rulers for balance of power politics that retain a potential for accommodationist policies.

## Sticker Shock

Looming far larger than either the Iranian or Iraqi threat is "sticker shock" from the costs of defense. Even more unnerving than the costs of the October 1994 response to Saddam is the realization that the Gulf states could easily be subject to repeated military costs, as well as flights of capital and investment deprivation each time Saddam decides to rattle the sabre. The financial burdens will vary from state to state but are heaviest for those who must face the ground threat from Iraq--Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. These are the states facing the most significant economic problems. All three--but especially Saudi Arabia--face debt and the burdens of having financed much of Desert Storm and Valiant Warrior, and are in the process of scaling back subsidies and services for their populations (see Strategic Forum #40).

## U.S. Force Posture Issues

If Iraq continues to be a threat--and there is every indication that it will be--the U.S. needs to maintain a robust force posture in the Gulf for the foreseeable future. Protection of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is currently undertaken by Operation Southern Watch (OSW) whose mission is to protect the Shi'ah population of southern Iraq against Saddam's repression, an undertaking that has been only marginally successful. OSW enforces the no-fly zone south of the 32nd parallel in Iraq, which deters an air attack in the northern Gulf. But neither Kuwait nor Saudi Arabia can match Iraq's ground forces, currently still the largest in the Gulf at about 400,000. Under United Nations Security Council Resolution 949, passed after the October 1995 crisis, the U.S. restricts Iraq's Republican Guard troops to territory north of the 32nd parallel, but Regular Army contingents are allowed below.

While foreign naval and air assets are welcome in GCC states, permanent stationing of foreign ground troops is politically unacceptable everywhere, including Kuwait. Thus, ultimately protection must rely on moving foreign (mainly U.S.) troops to the region in a timely fashion. As the October 1994 incident made clear, even a successful military deployment to check aggression is expensive. Given these dangers at the head of the Gulf, the United States not only needs to redefine its military mission there, but put its forces on a more permanent basis, one that is both affordable and politically sustainable. The differing threat perceptions of the United States and the Gulf population, especially with regard to Iraq, may make that task more difficult.

These difficulties point to the need for a clearer public statement of U.S. goals in the Gulf, as well as a better understanding by the Gulf population of national security needs, and of the respective roles of U.S. and Gulf national forces. Kuwaiti forces, for example, could be given a technological edge over Iraq, and trained over time to constitute a front line defense in the initial stages of attack until the United States arrives. While they cannot stand for long against a much larger Iraqi force, they could raise the costs to Iraq of attempted invasion and harassment. That could make the regime in Baghdad think twice about such tactics as it applied in October. However, it is not clear whether the regimes of these merchant monarchies will be willing to take on the domestic risk of developing larger and more effective armies, which can be used for more than one purpose.

## **GCC Cohesion**

Individual Gulf states could reduce defense expenditures and risks through greater coordination and burden sharing. But inter-GCC defense cooperation has grown only slowly, despite the myriad military threats in the region. Indeed, relaxation of the Cold War and tensions resulting from the Gulf War, have increased strains among GCC states and loosened some GCC bonds. In the face of sustained economic difficulties and a lack of agreement on threat perceptions, traditional fissures in the alliance could grow.

These fissures are many. Chief among them are a number of border disputes which preoccupy leaders. Historical tension between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has led to recent flare-ups, which are unlikely to have been affected by the July 1995 change in Qatar's ruler. Qatar is bitter about the 1994 shootings in its border dispute with Saudi Arabia. In addition, nationalist feelings are periodically aroused in Bahrain and Qatar over their island disputes. Saudi Arabia claims huge chunks of Omani territory. Oman and the

UAE have numerous disputed spots along their border. To these must be added tribal animosities and personal jealousies among rulers which prevent higher levels of trust between states. Greater defense coordination would mean some relinquishment of control by the rulers of each individual state over their particular patrimony, which they have been reluctant to do.

Another fault line in the GCC runs through Saudi Arabia. The smaller GCC states resent what they regard as Saudi hegemony. With 55 percent of GCC oil reserves, and 75 percent of its population, it is hard for Saudi Arabia not to dominate the GCC, but it has been heavy handed in dealing with its neighbors in the past. Qatar and Oman, for example, sometimes follow policies designed solely to thwart Saudi power.

In the past decade, particularly since the Gulf War, the GCC states have made considerable strides in bolstering their tier one and tier three defenses: those within states and those that depend on cooperation with the United States and other allies. They have done much less on the second tier, integrating GCC defenses. The response to the October crisis revealed this weakness; while most GCC states came to Kuwait's aid, they did so individually, not through the Peninsula Shield, the GCC defense force created for just such contingencies. GCC differences played a role in this. Qatar would not enlist under a Saudi banner. Saudi Arabia's initial perception of the threat was different from that of Kuwait and some persuasion was necessary to get a firm Saudi response to the crisis. GCC states are modernizing their armored ground forces and improving doctrine as well as hardware. The United States has defense agreements with five GCC states (the agreement with Saudi Arabia is informal) providing a framework for prepositioning, access to facilities and combined exercises.

The GCC has advanced plans to expand the Peninsula Shield force, currently sized at 8-10,000, to 100,000, a target that was soon scaled down to 20-25,000. These forces will remain in constituent countries and called up only in emergencies, an indication of lukewarm support for the force. Meanwhile, individual GCC countries are busy consolidating their own defense agreements with the United States for arms sales, prepositioning and exercises. Because there is no clear understanding among GCC elites on the defense role their militaries could play, there is continual grumbling over purchases of expensive equipment that "is not likely to be used by locals" and which is adding to domestic economic pressures. Much more needs to be done by the GCC in coordinating and spreading the defense burden; in developing C3 links between and among states; and moving toward "jointness" in their training and exercises. And in devising the new Gulf defense posture for the future, the United States needs to put more emphasis in achieving these goals in cooperation with its GCC partners.