

# Conclusion

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To what extent is Saudi security illusory? On the one hand, no country enjoys total security, and the Kingdom is certainly no exception. On the other, Saudi Arabia is seriously vulnerable to both internal and external pressures. The history of Saudi external security concerns indicates that explicit threats emerge, recede and are replaced by new threats in an almost cyclical pattern. Past success in withstanding these threats is no guarantee for the future, although the Kingdom does have a proven track record of withstanding them. But the enormous extent of fundamental internal change appears to be generating steadily increasing pressures on the country, the government and, especially, the ruling family and leadership.

This study of Gulf and Saudi security advances two specific and related conclusions. The first is longer-term or more fundamental: the need for an indigenous conceptualisation of Gulf security. The second is more medium-term: the Saudi–American relationship, upon which the Saudi regime has set so much store, has been damaged, possibly beyond full repair.

## **A policy of inclusion, not exclusion**

Growing numbers of people in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regard regional and even internal challenges as the most serious threats to Gulf security. They argue that effective and durable policy regarding Iraq and Iran must be based on inclusion rather than exclusion. Iraq and Iran are integral parts of the Gulf, and the Arab littoral must find productive ways of co-existing with the present regimes in those countries.

Policies of exclusion are counterproductive for a number of reasons. They do not achieve their desired goals: Saddam Hussein is still in power and following the same policies 11 years after the Kuwait War, and external pressure and sanctions have not forced regime change or adaptation in Iran. Moreover, generations of Iraqis and Iranians come to adulthood knowing only hostility from the West and also from the Gulf states, and, quite naturally, this creates in them a profound and long-term counter-hostility. Policies of exclusion hamper or prevent the very type of socio-economic development in the Gulf that promises to benefit all parties.

Policies of inclusion are desirable because they diminish or counteract the hostility, and hence the threats, of both regimes and populations in Iraq and Iran. Creating economic bonds between the Gulf states and Iraq and Iran holds the promise of binding the states together and rendering impotent hostile policies that cause damage on all sides.<sup>1</sup> Policies of inclusion make compromise solutions to disputes more likely.<sup>2</sup> They represent attempts to reach permanent solutions to current problems with the aim of fostering moderation and cooperation between states, rather than short-term strategies that use superior power to force recalcitrant regimes to alter policies.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the divergence in Saudi Arabia between regime and popular views of Gulf security threatens to drive a wedge between rulers and ruled. Debate about the issue of Gulf security, which could potentially lead to the formulation of a Gulf or Saudi concept of Gulf security, is absent because the government inhibits free speech and resists meaningful political participation.

The old bases of the Saudi regime's legitimacy have been eroded due to such factors as the elaboration and complication of society, the increasing infiltration of external ideas,<sup>4</sup> the growing sophistication of the population, and the burgeoning intelligentsia. The Saudi regime is reluctant to permit or expand political participation, because it fears this will further erode legitimacy, undermine the privileged position of the ruling family and weaken the existing basis of state and society. But the regime's failure to recognise popular concerns and/or act upon them may lead to alienation. Public opinion is extremely exercised about the plight of both the Palestinians and the Iraqi people. Many Saudis are also concerned about the American war in Afghanistan and hints of further reprisals against Muslims elsewhere. The outbreak of demonstrations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states at the onset of

the second *intifada*, as well as calls for the removal of Israeli trade missions in Gulf states and boycotts of American symbols such as McDonalds, was perceived by the regime as a threat to the public order. Vague expressions of support today for leaders like Saddam Hussein may lead to more substantial backing in the future. Actions such as demonstrations, public discussion and other activities focused on external events and policies may encourage similar expressions regarding internal policies

Conceptualisation of Gulf security and strategies is hampered because the government actively discourages debate by local media, institutes and other groups. Consequently, conceptions of Gulf security and strategies originate in Western policy making and think tanks; there is no independent conceptualisation in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf to reflect Gulf conceptions of Gulf security – this is a major reason why Gulf security formulations consider only external threats. While Western Gulf security formulations only consider the external environment, Saudi views of Gulf security include both internal and external threats, and even regard the internal threats as significantly more serious.

An indigenous conceptualisation of Gulf security may well reject the cornerstone principle of containment. Serious doubts are expressed at all levels of society about American resolve and motivations. Containment can only be a short- or medium-term strategy: it addresses static ‘present-day’ situations without providing or working towards offering fundamental solutions to the immediate political problems.

There is considerable reason to believe that Saudi Arabia’s acquiescence in a Western-driven environment of containment is actually inimical to its long-term interests. If the present regime persists in following this avenue, there is a growing likelihood that relations with its population will be endangered, perhaps fatally. While in the foreseeable future there may be no alternative to partnership with the United States generally, and reliance on an American–Saudi security alliance in particular, Saudi Arabia’s failure to develop an indigenous security strategy will almost certainly guarantee that the Kingdom will have no future choice but to follow the American lead, despite the costs.

### **The health of Saudi–US relations**

For most of its history, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has placed

extraordinary emphasis on its 'special relationship' with the United States, a relationship seen as instrumental in forging and shaping the country's socio-economic development and equally vital in assuring the Kingdom's security. But the long-standing partnership between Washington and Riyadh is showing increasing strains both in the wider strategic (or regional security) aspect and in bilateral relations.

Nevertheless, for Saudi Arabia there is no alternative to continuing its 'special relationship' with the US. And, if truth be told, there is little alternative for the United States either, without great cost. The most important reason for the US to save the relationship is undeniably the dominant position of Saudi Arabia in the world oil market. US imports of Saudi oil may be declining, but it should not be forgotten that the non-interruption of Saudi exports to Europe and especially Asia are also extremely important considerations in the American national interest.

There is, however, another important reason for the relationship, and one that goes beyond the simplistic dictum of 'security for oil'. The United States cannot afford to overlook the importance of Saudi Arabia as an ally and supporter in the region. The Kingdom is a convenient base for – as well as supporter of – regional operations, whether against Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia or wherever else US force might be needed in the unforeseeable future. Even more importantly, Saudi political influence in the Gulf, Arab and Islamic spheres is valuable to American foreign-policy objectives. The Saudi role is not one that can simply be replicated by the US acting on its own, and there are few actors in the region with the standing and broad ties that Riyadh offers.<sup>5</sup>

Change in Saudi Arabia is glacial: it may not be easy to see but it does exist, as a retrospective examination of the past six or seven decades will confirm. The Kingdom is in the midst of a period during which internal demands on and challenges to the existing system seem to be accelerating. Thus the West must recognise that a unique process of change exists in the Saudi environment and encourage its steady continuation where appropriate. The West should continue to support the economic liberalisation of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, not only for the prospective trade and investment benefits this will bring, but because the growing populations and small-sized economies in the Gulf will increasingly need steady economic diversification and growth in employment opportunities.

Economic change drives political perceptions. Any 'social contract' based on traditional relations between rulers and ruled in the Gulf is already dying. As society evolves, as economic opportunities become more restricted, and as citizens find themselves sharing less and less in the lifestyles and perceptions of ruling families, political change is as inevitable – and it will be difficult. Heavy-handed pressure on Saudi Arabia to create an elected parliamentary body is not appropriate. Gentle encouragement of such core concerns as free and constructive fora of debate on national issues and gradually freer treatment of women might be more proper and effective. On the Saudi side, expanding Western tourism along the lines followed by some of its GCC neighbours undoubtedly will bring benefits over and above additional income.

In terms of external security, policy makers in Washington and other Western capitals must realise that unilateral actions affecting the Gulf, the Middle East and the Islamic world have deep impacts on Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and their people. American policies concerning Iraq and Iran should be based on full discussion and agreement with Riyadh and the GCC at the highest government levels. Military solutions can only have short-term impact and, without whole-hearted cooperation from the GCC states, will be more difficult and ephemeral in their results. Disengagement from the problem of deepening Israeli–Palestinian hostility (and from constructive dialogue with the Palestinian Authority) will continue to harm American interests in much of the world. The Kingdom may not be able to change American policy *vis-à-vis* Israel but it will find it necessary to create more distance between itself and the United States, even if it is only on this issue.

In the short to medium term, it is in the interests of both sides to repair and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship, even if it should mean significant loosening of the bonds and at least some Saudi acquiescence in an American policy of containment. Over the long-term, however, Saudi interests may be best served by nurturing a more indigenous conception and practice of Gulf security, one which rests on inclusion and not exclusion. Total security is an illusion, of course. But acting positively to transform potential threats into partners and basing policy on the participation of all sectors of Saudi society is the best option Saudi Arabia has.

