

**The Approaching Turning Point:  
The Future of U.S. Relations with the Gulf States**

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## Executive Summary

United States policy toward the Gulf Cooperation Council states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) is in the midst of an important change. Saudi Arabia has served as the linchpin of American military and political influence in the Gulf since Desert Storm. It can no longer play that role. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, an American military presence in the kingdom is no longer sustainable in the political system of either the United States or Saudi Arabia. Washington therefore has to rely on the smaller Gulf monarchies to provide the infrastructure for its military presence in the region. The build-up toward war with Iraq has accelerated that change, with the Saudis unwilling to cooperate openly with Washington on this issue. No matter the outcome of war with Iraq, the political and strategic logic of basing American military power in these smaller Gulf states is compelling.

In turn, Saudi-American relations need to be reconstituted on a basis that serves the shared interests of both states, and can be sustained in both countries' political systems. That requires an end to the basing of American forces in the kingdom. The fall of Saddam Hussein will facilitate this goal, allowing the removal of the American air wing in Saudi Arabia that patrols southern Iraq. The public opinion benefits for the Saudis of the departure of the American forces will permit a return to a more normal, if somewhat more distant, cooperative relationship with the United States. However, important difficulties remain to be addressed in the relationship.

Those who contend that the Saudi-US relationship can continue as it has are misreading political realities in both countries. However, those in the United States who argue that the Saudis should be viewed not as a strategic partner, but as an enemy, do not offer a practical alternative for American policy. Their course means giving up the influence that a decades-long relationship provides with a government that controls 25% of the world's known oil reserves and that can play a central role – positive or negative – in political and ideological trends in the Muslim world. They can offer no guarantee that any successor regime in Arabia would be more amenable to American interests.

The American agenda with Saudi Arabia should concentrate on those foreign policy issues where Riyadh's cooperation is essential for American interests. These include: oil policy, regional stability and the Saudi role in the larger Muslim world, both in terms of practical "war on terrorism" issues, like intelligence sharing and terrorist financing, and a more active Saudi role in delegitimizing the bin Ladenist interpretation of Islam. Washington should not involve itself overtly in sensitive domestic political issues in Saudi Arabia, like women's rights or the role of the religious establishment. The scrutiny that the Saudis have received in the U.S. since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks has played an important role in spurring self-examination and indications of reform in Riyadh. Both official and private Americans should continue to stress important reform issues for Saudi Arabia.

A key realization, however, is that any reform program with a "made-in-America" stamp on it will lead to a backlash within Saudi Arabia. Efforts to broaden political participation need to come from Saudi leaders, not from Washington, in order to be credible and acceptable in Saudi society. Washington must also realize that elections in Saudi Arabia will yield representative bodies more anti-American than the current regime, and complicate American-Saudi relations. In terms of Saudi domestic politics, the United States can more directly and openly push the Saudis to move on

economic reforms aimed at increasing transparency, lessening corruption and increasing the job prospects of the burgeoning Saudi youth population.

The smaller Gulf states are better able to manage the political consequences of an American military presence than is Saudi Arabia. The same logic that made them the centerpiece of British Gulf strategy for 150 years still remains today. However, with its increasing reliance upon them, the United States must avoid the fallacy that it can simply recreate the British role in the Gulf of a past colonial age. With better-educated and more politically aware populations, these smaller states cannot be viewed simply as protectorates. The United States role needs to be minimally acceptable in local public opinion. This will depend enormously on how overall American policy is viewed there on larger issues in the Arab and Muslim worlds, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In these new political circumstances, the United States must also avoid the temptation to play an overtly imperial role of direct intervention in local politics, such as in ruling family factional squabbles. Changes imposed from the outside, no matter how well intentioned, are likely to misread local realities and to engender a local backlash. With this strategy in place, the U.S. will be far better prepared to weather the upcoming turning point in U.S.-GCC relations.

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## **The Approaching Turning Point: The Future of U.S. Relations with the Gulf States**

American policy toward the Gulf Cooperation Council states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman) is in the midst of a sea change. That change might be affected at the margins by the outcome of the coming war with Iraq, but its direction is set. The change began before the attacks of September 11, 2001, but its pace has accelerated since that fateful day. For reasons of domestic politics in both Saudi Arabia and the United States, Washington can no longer look to Riyadh as the military centerpiece of its Gulf strategy. Because of the growing distance in the Saudi-American relationship, the smaller Gulf states will assume an even more central role in the maintenance of American military power in the region, certainly during the war against Iraq, and most probably thereafter.

The United States now faces the third crucial turning point in its Gulf policy over the past thirty years, since Great Britain gave up its role as protecting power over the smaller states of the lower Gulf. The first turning point in U.S.-G.C.C. relations was the British withdrawal of 1971, and the response was the Nixon Doctrine policy of the “twin pillars.” Unwilling to assume direct military responsibilities in the region in the midst of the Vietnam War, Washington built up the Shah’s Iran and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia with huge arms sales and military training missions. The aim was that they would act as “regional policemen.” That policy fell apart with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, but the military stalemate in the Iran-Iraq War permitted the United States to remain relatively distant from the region for most of the 1980’s.

The second turning point began in 1987, with the massive American naval deployment in the Gulf at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and culminated in the Gulf War of 1990-91. This was driven by the fear that a hostile local power, first revolutionary Iran, then Saddam’s Iraq, would dominate the region. The regional proxy policy was replaced by one of direct and sustained American military presence. Our military relationship with the Arab monarchies of the GCC, close before that period, became more open, as all six states came to host what looks to everyone in the region as a permanent American military presence. For the first time since the closing of the American military airbase in eastern Saudi Arabia in 1961, there was a continuous American air force presence in Saudi Arabia from 1991 – not training missions or American advisors to Saudi units, but an American air wing stationed in the kingdom. American bases were also built in Kuwait and Qatar. The American naval force in the Gulf, a paltry three ships in 1971, was given fleet status and its headquarters in Bahrain was expanded. American access to facilities in Oman and the UAE increased as well.

This current, third turning point will consolidate the American military role in the smaller Gulf states, while bringing to an end our more open military cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Whether consciously or not, the United States is falling into the historic position of Great Britain in the Gulf, and seems set to replicate the general outlines of British Gulf strategy: a strong presence on the coast, with a general aversion to become too involved in inland Arabia. If combined with a new role in Iraq, the American strategic position would mirror that of Britain between 1920 and 1958. However, the regional circumstances are much different from that of the first half of the twentieth century. The populations of the smaller Gulf states are larger, more educated, and more politically mobilized now. That does not mean that these regimes are ripe for revolution. On the contrary, their immediate prospects for regime stability are very good. But it does mean that a close military association with the United States might become more difficult to sustain domestically in the future – as it already has in Saudi Arabia.

## Map of the Middle East Region <sup>1</sup>



### I. U.S.-Saudi Relations: How Low Can They Go?

#### *The Impact of Public Opinion, on Both Sides*

The Saudi-American relationship has never relied on broad-based public support, on either side of the partnership. It has always been an elite bargain, primarily revolving around security and

<sup>1</sup> Map from *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* by Rick Atkinson. Copyright © 1993 by Rick Atkinson. Reprinted with permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. All Rights Reserved.

oil. Saudi Arabia contains 25% of all the known oil reserves in the world; the states bordering the Persian Gulf contain about 65% of all the known oil reserves in the world. From World War II American strategic and military planners defined access to that oil, and its denial to any enemy, as essential to America's security. The "oil revolution" of the 1970's, when prices jumped from less than \$2.00 per barrel at the beginning of the decade to over \$30.00 per barrel by the end, made oil not just a strategic commodity, but a domestic economic issue as well. Oil decisions made in the Gulf directly affect the American and world economies, and thus the political fortunes of American leaders. Maintaining influence over oil decisions in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf has come to be a central element of America's role as both military superpower and economic manager.

On the Saudi side, the American security link has been the key element of the ruling family's foreign policy since the 1940's, even while the specific identity of the regional threats has changed. In the 1930's and 1940's the threat was from the British-supported Hashemites in Iraq and Jordan, whom the Saudis had ejected from western Arabia as they built their state. In the 1950's and 1960's it was the Arab nationalist movement, spearheaded by Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt and supported by the Soviet Union. Iran's Islamic revolution and Saddam Hussein's regional ambitions were the major threats in the 1980's and 1990's. What has not changed is the fact that the Saudis rule over a vast country, with huge wealth but a relatively small population and a weak military – weak in part by design, to prevent the internal threat of a military coup. The Saudis have looked to the United States for six decades to provide the ultimate guarantee of their security against ambitious regional neighbors.

The strong material and political interests that underlie the relationship have overcome the vast political and cultural differences between the two societies. Those differences do not make the relationship less "legitimate" than other international relationships. Oil and regional security in the Gulf area are very important American interests. However, the relationship has flourished most when the public eye, on both sides, has not focused upon it. In times of crisis, there is no reservoir of popular support to be drawn upon for sustaining the relationship. Just the opposite: The more public scrutiny that is focused on the relationship, both in the United States and in Saudi Arabia, the more difficult it becomes for the elites on each side to defend it.

The post-September 11<sup>th</sup> atmosphere reflects this dynamic. According to a poll by Zogby International, in January 2001 56% of Americans polled viewed Saudi Arabia favorably, 28% unfavorably. In December 2001, those numbers had basically reversed, with only 24% viewing Saudi Arabia favorably and 58% unfavorably.<sup>2</sup> One would be hard-pressed to find an American who did not know that 15 of the 19 hijackers on September 11<sup>th</sup> were from Saudi Arabia. Similarly, much of the American political and media elite, which had generally accepted the US-Saudi relationship, now began to question the value for the United States of a close relationship with Riyadh. For example, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both urged a new and more critical American stance toward the kingdom. They even used the same title in their editorials: "Reconsidering Saudi Arabia." The *Times* said those relations are in an "untenable and unreliable state" because of "Saudi Arabia's tolerance for terrorism." The *Post* said that Saudi Arabia's "autocratic system...is itself one of the root causes of Islamic extremism."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Poll cited in Dr. James J. Zogby, "New Poll Shows Damage Done," December 24, 2001. Accessed via "GulfWire" e-newsletter, www.arabialink.com.

<sup>3</sup>The editorials can be found in *New York Times*, October 14, 2001 and *Washington Post*, November 11, 2001.

American liberals have always been wary of the strong U.S.-Saudi relationship, as part of their general suspicion of U.S. allies who are undemocratic and do not meet American standards on human rights and women's rights. What has changed most dramatically since the attacks of 9/11, however, has been the attitude in the American right wing toward Saudi Arabia. Both neo-conservatives and the religious right had previously accepted the close American relationship with Riyadh on strategic grounds, even while opposing many aspects of Saudi politics and society. They have now become vocal critics of the relationship.

Given the importance of both of these groups in the Republican Party, it is hard to see how the U.S.-Saudi relationship could return to the generally unexamined state (from the American public's perspective) that existed before 2001. There have been, and will continue to be, sufficient issues to keep the relationship in the media spotlight. One example, from late 2002, was the Congressional and media furor over the revelation that personal checks from the wife of the Saudi ambassador to Washington (herself a member of the ruling family) to Saudis living in the United States were signed over to associates of two of the 19 September 11 hijackers. Though there was no evidence that the ambassador's wife had any knowledge of the fund transfer, the incident sparked a new wave of attention to, and condemnation of, Saudi Arabia.

A parallel shift in public opinion has occurred in Saudi Arabia. The close relationship with the United States has always been a controversial issue in the kingdom. For committed "Wahhabi" Islamists, any dealings with non-Muslim powers are suspect. For most in that category, the American presence in the kingdom is, at best, something to be tolerated as a political necessity ordered by the government. For some, though, it is a focus of violent opposition. 'Usama bin Laden made the American military presence in Saudi Arabia the centerpiece of his indictment of the ruling family. Attacks on an American training mission attached to the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh in 1995 and on an apartment building in the eastern province housing American air force personnel in 1996 took the lives of 24 Americans. The later attack led to the transfer of the American air wing from Dhahran, in the populated Eastern province, to the Prince Sultan Airbase south of Riyadh, in the desert.

Other Saudis who do not oppose the American presence on religious grounds do so for political reasons, because it implies a lack of real independence for the country and because of the close American relationship with Israel. For many Saudis, the proudest moment in their country's recent political history was 1973, when the kingdom placed an oil embargo on the United States to support the Arab war effort against Israel. While it appeared, in the 1990's, that the Arab-Israeli conflict was on the way to peaceful resolution, the intensity of that element of anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia decreased. However, with the more recent collapse of the peace process, the Palestinian issue regained its emotional weight in Saudi public opinion.

Unprecedented polling in Saudi Arabia since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks confirms the anti-American trend in public opinion. A Gallup poll, conducted in late January-early February 2002, reported that 64% of Saudi respondents viewed the U.S. either very unfavorably or most unfavorably. Majorities in the poll associated America with the adjectives "conceited, ruthless and arrogant." Fewer than 10% saw the U.S. as either friendly or trustworthy.<sup>4</sup> A Zogby International poll, conducted in March 2002, reported similar results. Only 30% of the Saudis polled supported American-led efforts

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Burkholder, "The U.S. and the West – Through Saudi Eyes," Gallup Tuesday Briefing, August 6, 2002, [www.gallup.com/poll/tb/goverpubli/20020806.asp](http://www.gallup.com/poll/tb/goverpubli/20020806.asp).



to fight terrorism, while 57% opposed it. Moreover, only 43% had a favorable opinion of the American people, and 51% an unfavorable opinion – the highest unfavorable rating of the eight Muslim countries in which the poll was conducted (the others were Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, the UAE, Indonesia, Iran and Pakistan). More recent polls, also confirmed this trend on the eve of war with Iraq, conducted in Saudi Arabia in February-March 2003, found that 95% of those polled had either a very or somewhat unfavorable attitude toward the United States, compared with only 4% favorable.<sup>5</sup>

The polling also focused on specific sources of Saudi public antipathy toward Washington. Majorities looked favorably upon American science and technology (71%), American freedom and democracy (52%), American movies and television (54%), and American education (58%). However, fewer than 10% viewed US policy in the Arab world or on the Palestinian issue in a favorably light. 64% of those polled said the Palestinian issue was either the most important or a very important political issue to them, and 79% said they would have a more favorable view toward the U.S. if it “would apply pressure to ensure the creation of an independent Palestinian state.”<sup>6</sup>

These public sentiments of anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia have both constrained, but also have been encouraged by, the Saudi government. The focus on Saudi Arabia in the American media immediately after 9/11 led a number of Saudi officials, including Crown Prince Abdullah, to complain publicly that the Kingdom was being targeted in a “campaign” against it.<sup>7</sup> The Saudi government very publicly denied American forces the right to use Saudi bases for the air campaign in Afghanistan, even while quietly allowing the U.S. to use the command and control center at Prince Sultan Airbase, south of Riyadh, to coordinate that campaign. In a public meeting with Saudis in November 2001, the Crown Prince revealed that in August 2001 he had sent a letter to President Bush complaining of the American stand on the Arab-Israeli issue. In that letter, he said that differences between the two countries on that issue had grown so great that “from now on, you have your interests and the Kingdom has its interests, and you have your road and we have our road.”<sup>8</sup> Ironically, Abdullah’s revelation was part of a defense of the value of the U.S.-Saudi relationship for the Palestinians, because it gave Riyadh leverage with Washington on Arab-Israeli issues. He went on to say that, because of his letter, the Bush Administration shortly thereafter announced public support for the idea of a Palestinian state. However, the fact that a Saudi leader publicly acknowledged such a dispute with the United States was undoubtedly meant to demonstrate that the government was reflecting the views of its citizens on this issue.

These signals from the Saudi ruling elite that all was not well in its relationship with the United States were taken by the Saudi media as a green light for criticism of the American “war on terrorism.” Saudi accounts of the “media campaign” against the Kingdom in the U.S. accused the American media of practicing “psychological terrorism” against Saudi Arabia, emphasized that such criticism was inspired by “Zionist” elements. They also called into question the “real” goals behind the American “war on terrorism.”<sup>9</sup> Saudi newspaper coverage of the war in Afghanistan highlighted

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<sup>5</sup> Shibley Telhami, “A View from the Arab World: A Survey in Five Countries,” March 13, 2002. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/analysis/survey20030313.htm>

<sup>6</sup> “The 10 Nation ‘Impressions of America’ Poll Report,” Zogby International, August 7, 2002, [www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=610](http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=610).

<sup>7</sup> For one example, see Karen DeYoung, “Saudis Seethe over Media Reports on Anti-Terror Effort,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> The quote is taken from a long article about Abdallah’s letter and US-Saudi relations before September 11: Sulayman Nimr, “qisat al-rasa’il al-mutabadil bayn al-amir abd allah wa bush,” *al-Hayat*, November 6, 2001, p. 7. For the first account in the Western press of Abdallah’s discussion of Saudi-American tensions before September 11, see James M. Dorsey, “Saudi Leader Warns US Mideast Policy May Force Kingdom to Review Relationship,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of such comments from a number of Saudi newspapers, see “‘amrika wa ‘al-‘irhab al-nifsi’ wa ‘ahdaf al-hamla al-‘askariyya,” *al-Hayat*, October 16, 2001, p. 6.

civilian deaths at the hands of American bombing. The Saudi press published a number of stories about Saudis detained in the United States, some of which accused American authorities of mistreatment. In all, the media and public opinion atmosphere in Saudi Arabia after the attacks, already disposed against the United States for a number of reasons, only got worse.

Taken aback by the intensity of the public reactions, both in the United States and at home, the Saudi government has taken a number of steps aimed at improving the atmosphere in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. These include the Crown Prince's peace initiative on the Arab-Israeli front (revealed in February 2002 to New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, a harsh critic of Saudi Arabia), his visit to President Bush's ranch in Texas in April 2002, and his open letter to President Bush on the first anniversary of the attacks. While these steps are largely aimed at improving the public view of Saudi Arabia in the United States, they are also a signal to Saudi public opinion that there are limits to the amount of anti-Americanism that the regime will tolerate at home. Elite intellectuals close to the regime have picked up on these signals, with a number of articles appearing in August 2002 arguing that a complete break with the world's only superpower will not serve Saudi, Arab, or Muslim interests.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, as the war with Iraq approached, the Saudis made clear that they would cooperate as much as possible – that is to say, without having to publicly cooperate – with the American military effort.<sup>11</sup> However, it is hard to see how Saudi public opinion toward the United States will change dramatically any time soon, between the strong reaction against U.S. policy toward Iraq and continued deterioration on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

### *Upcoming Bumps on the Road*

In neither the American nor the Saudi cases has public opinion completely driven the relationship. The Bush Administration has repeatedly and publicly emphasized its desire for continued close ties to the Saudis. Crown Prince Abdullah and other Saudi leaders have done the same. Washington and Riyadh continue to have important overlapping interests on oil and regional security questions, even if those interests are not identical. But this change in public opinion does place significant constraints on both sides. In the Saudi case, events since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks have made clear that, unless their own regime security interests are directly threatened (as they were when Iraq attacked Kuwait in 1990), the Saudi rulers are loathe to cooperate openly with the United States on issues which run against the grain of Saudi public opinion. In the American case, this Saudi reluctance, so clear both on Afghanistan and on the current preparations for war with Iraq, simply strengthens the general view that Saudi Arabia is not a completely reliable ally.

Moreover, there are a number of issues on the horizon that could increase tensions between Riyadh and Washington. The first and most obvious is differing positions on Iraq. Arab-Israeli issues also promise to be a continuing irritant in the relationship. But two other issues, more directly situated in the bilateral Saudi-American relationship, also loom. One is the financial front in the war on terrorism. The Saudi government, responding at least in part to American pressure, announced in early December 2002 a series of steps aimed at exerting greater control over Saudi Islamic charities. However, no public moves have been taken against any prominent Saudis in this area,

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<sup>10</sup>See the article by Ghazi al-Qusaybi, until recently Saudi ambassador in London and now the new Minister of Water in the Saudi cabinet. Al-Qusaybi had been very critical of the Bush Administration in the past. "laysa min salih al-sa'udiyya dukhul muwajaha ma'a 'amrika," al-Hayat, August 21, 2002, p. 9. See also Muhammad bin Abd al-Latif Al Alshaykh, "man al-mustafid min ta'miq al-sharakh al-sa'udi-al-'amriki?" al-Hayat, August 23, 2002, p. 9. For an account of Saudi fears that the backlash in the United States against the kingdom might be permanently damaging U.S.-Saudi relations, see Dawud al-Shiryan, "al-'alaqat al-sa'udiyya-al-'amriyya fi mahkamat al-ra'i al-'am," al-Hayat, August 18, 2002, pp. 1, 6.

<sup>11</sup>Christopher Cooper and Greg Jaffe, "US Use of Saudi Airbase Shows Kingdom's Quiet Commitment," Wall Street Journal, March 12, 2003; Robin Allen and Roula Khalaf, "Saudis Allow Use of Key Facilities to US," Financial Times, March 9, 2003.

despite good indications of links to terror-funding. There have been reports that officials in the American government are pressing for a more aggressive stance toward Saudi Arabia, including naming a number of Saudis as prominent financiers of terrorism.<sup>12</sup> If these names do become public, the Saudi government's willingness to take public steps against them will become a marker of its bona fides in the war on terrorism. This kind of public naming could backfire, though, if not carefully managed. It might play into the perceptions of many in Saudi Arabia that the U.S. is unfairly targeting Muslims and Arabs in general, and Saudis in particular.

The other looming issue that could lead to Saudi-American tension is oil. Since 1997, Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in coordinating efforts both within OPEC and with non-OPEC producers to restrict supply and push prices up. Given the pressures within Saudi Arabia of a fast-growing population and an aging infrastructure built for a much smaller population, the Saudi government cannot afford to see the price of oil fall very far.<sup>13</sup> The Saudis have worked to maintain prices within the OPEC band of \$22-28 per barrel, most recently engineering an OPEC commitment at its December 2002 meeting for members to cut production. To date, the United States has not objected too strenuously to these efforts by Saudi Arabia to prop up prices, perhaps because Riyadh has also publicly committed to prevent prices from spiking above the OPEC band. However, it was much easier to bear those higher prices during the robust economic times of the 1990's. With the slower economy, the Bush Administration might want Saudi Arabia to moderate prices, not only during what will probably be a short war with Iraq but also for the longer term. How the Saudis would react to such requests is an open question.

Some argue that a new U.S. Friendly regime in Iraq would change this equation. Iraq has the second largest known oil reserves in the world, after Saudi Arabia, and has been closed off from international investment and technology for more than a decade. However, a successful American war in Iraq is not likely, even in the medium term, to lessen the centrality of Saudi Arabia in the world oil market. Even if no oil fields or facilities are damaged in the war, the immediate oil payoff of a change in regime in Iraq will be small. Iraqi production today is between 2.5 and 2.8 million barrels per day (bpd). This is about 1 million-bpd less than it was in 1990. For comparison, Saudi Arabia produces about 8 million-bpd, and could quickly move well above 9 million. Getting Iraq back up to pre-Gulf War levels will take some time after the change of regime. Pushing to increase Iraqi production beyond that level will require major foreign investment and a substantial lead-time for exploration and development. One authoritative recent study said it would take nearly a decade for Iraq to achieve a production level of 6 million bpd.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the promise of Caspian and Russian oil development seems increasingly long-term. If world demand for oil continues to increase, the extra barrels that Iraq, Central Asia and Russia can bring on the market might easily be absorbed, without detracting from Saudi Arabia's centrality in the market. The Energy Department's Energy Information Administration estimates that Saudi Arabia will have to more than double its production capacity over the next 20 years to meet increased world demand, despite the promise of new oil finds elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> In the immediate term, the numbers make clear that any substantial increase in world oil production now would have to come from Saudi Arabia and, to a

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Farah, "Saudis Face U.S. Demand on Terrorism; Halting Financiers May Be Urged," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> I discuss the link between Saudi oil policy and its fiscal situation in "Saudi Arabia Over a Barrel," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 3, (May/June 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See "Addendum: Oil and Iraq: Opportunities and Challenges" in *Guiding Principles for U.S. Post-Conflict Policy in Iraq*, report of an independent working group co-sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, [www.cfr.org/publication.php?id=5314](http://www.cfr.org/publication.php?id=5314).

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Gerth, "Growing U.S. Need for Oil From the Mideast is Forecast," *New York Times*, December 26, 2002.

lesser extent, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. The idea that a victory in Iraq will immediately reduce the Saudi role in the world oil market is wishful thinking.

### ***Debunking the “Saudis as Enemies” Thesis***

Tensions are inevitable in the Saudi-American relationship, and public support on both sides is at an all-time low. The relationship is bound to change. To some extent, the Bush Administration’s focus on Iraq has postponed that change. Once the war with Iraq ends, the future of Saudi-American relations will certainly reemerge on the Administration’s agenda. The question that both governments confront is where they want it to go.

On the Saudi side, the answer is clear. Riyadh wants the relationship to continue, but with greater “political distance” than has been the case since 1991. Because of the American military presence in the Kingdom, and the extremely close association developed from the Gulf War, the Saudis have been implicated in a number of unpopular American policies, in the eyes of their own citizens and the region. With their stance on the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, they have made clear that they are seeking to rebalance the relationship, more on the model of the pre-1990 period. Then the U.S. military presence was “over the horizon” rather than in the Saudi backyard. There was strong cooperation then, but on a much less public level. The post-September 11<sup>th</sup> period demonstrates that the Saudis are more comfortable with that kind of distance in the relationship.

The debate on the American side about the future of the relationship is more vigorous. The first and most basic issue for Washington to decide is whether Saudi Arabia is an enemy of the United States, because of the interpretation of Islam it fosters. No one in government has put the issue so baldly, at least in public, but there are many outside of the government who have done so. Most notably, a French researcher invited to brief the Defense Policy Board in July 2002 called Saudi Arabia the “kernel of evil” in the Middle East and the country most responsible for terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

The problem with the “Saudis as enemies” argument is that its proponents offer no convincing case for how to deal with a Saudi government defined as an enemy. The French researcher in the briefing mentioned above simply urged that the Saudis be “targeted” unless their behavior changed, without saying specifically how that should be done. Most importantly, such critics can identify no alternative ruling group in Arabia, with a realistic chance of unseating the Al Sa’ud, which would better conform to American interests. While the ruling family is divided on policy issues, as any political elite is, there are powerful elements within it that identify their own interests and the interests of their country to lie with the United States. They are the most likely source of changes in Saudi policy, on both foreign policy and domestic politics issues, which the United States seeks. The only organized social forces in the country with the popular following potentially to challenge the regime are religious dissidents and the official religious establishment. The “Saudis as enemies” argument defines the threat to the United States from Saudi Arabia as its religious ideology. As such, it would hardly be in the American interest to encourage the downfall of the Al Sa’ud, if the only group in a position to replace them would then be even more committed to that ideology.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, “Briefing Depicted Saudis as Enemies,” *Washington Post*, August 6, 2002, p. A1.

Fantasies about American military occupation of the Saudi oil fields, encouraging the geographic break-up of the country, hardly deserve comment. The Saudi oil patch is in the eastern part of the country, bordering the Persian Gulf. The Saudi Shi'i minority, about 10% of the total population, is concentrated there. It would certainly not be in the interests of the United States to create a Shi'i statelet, with sectarian and cultural affinities with Iran, which would control 25% of the world's oil reserves. The alternative to an Iranian alliance for such an entity would be protectorate relations with Washington, obliging the U.S. to defend an area that would be the target of whatever government came to rule in the rest of Arabia, be it Saudi or not. Putting Iraq back together after the coming war will be hard enough for the United States. Taking on a permanent Shi'i protectorate in eastern Arabia, on top of Iraq, is simply ludicrous.

The bottom line on the "Saudis as enemies" argument is that, as emotionally satisfying as it might be for those who propound it, it does not offer a practical and achievable roadmap for advancing American interests. It is simply not sensible for the United States to make an enemy of a government, which sits on 25% of all the known oil reserves in the world, which controls the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and which seeks to cooperate with the United States on a number of key issues.

### ***Where to Now? Rethinking the Security Relationship and the Wider War on Terrorism***

The more important debate on the U.S.-Saudi relationship revolves around the basis on which Washington will seek to reconstruct it. Clearly, the relationship with Riyadh is not an alliance, at least the way that term has come to be understood in the United States. The Saudis are not going to be "with us" on every Middle Eastern initiative, or on every element of the war on terrorism, that we pursue. It is more accurate to think of them as strategic partners on a number of vitally important issues, including oil, regional stability in the Gulf, Arab-Israeli peace, and the global debate in the Muslim world about radicalism and terrorism. Our interests overlap, but are not identical. Where they do overlap, we can work together. Where they do not, we will go our separate ways.

In fact, one of the most troubling issues in the relationship, the American military presence in the kingdom, is on its way to solution. The great bulk of uniformed American military personnel in Saudi Arabia now are in the air wing (approximately 5,000 troops) stationed at Prince Sultan Airbase. They maintain the air patrols over southern Iraq (Operation Southern Watch) established shortly after the Gulf War. If an American military attack on Iraq brings down Saddam Hussein, the need for those air patrols disappears. At that point, the air wing can be withdrawn. The command and control facilities built at the Airbase are already being duplicated in Qatar.

With this shift, an issue that 'Usama bin Laden has used to stir up anti-Americanism both in Saudi Arabia and in the larger Muslim world will no longer be on the agenda. The more conspiratorial interpretations among the Saudi public about the purpose of that deployment – to "protect" the ruling family, to "steal" Saudi oil, to "control" the holy cities – will be shown to be false. The cost of the solution to this problem, a major war with Iraq and a massive American military occupation just north of the Saudi border, will create its own problems for Saudi public opinion regarding the United States. However, the *domestic* focus of anti-American feelings in the kingdom will be gone, relieving the Saudi government of what has come to be a political burden. American forces, stuck in the middle of the desert with little access to off-base entertainment, and

under increasingly stringent Saudi limitations in terms of use of the base (reacting to their own public opinion), will likewise not be sorry to leave.

The only downside to redeploying our forces out of Saudi Arabia comes in the context of Iran's now more public quest to acquire nuclear weapons. Without the explicit security guarantee represented by an American military presence in the country, the Saudi leadership might feel that it has to acquire an "off the shelf" nuclear deterrent capacity to match Iran. In 1987, without the knowledge of the U.S., Saudi Arabia obtained surface to surface missile from China as the Iran-Iraq War spread to the waters of the Gulf. A similar move on the nuclear front is not inconceivable. It is, however, highly dangerous. It would escalate the regional arms race, and there are no assurances that the Saudis could handle issues of security, command and control, accidental launch avoidance, etc. As a result, any American redeployment out of Saudi Arabia needs to be accompanied by a public renewal of the American security commitment to stability in the Gulf and security for its strategic partners from foreign attack. It also needs to be accompanied by the strongest private representations to the Saudis that a policy of WMD proliferation would forfeit that American commitment.

The end of the major American military presence within Saudi hardly solves all the problems in the relationship. The United States must push the Saudis to use their prestige and their networks in the wider Muslim world to take a more active role in the "war on terrorism." Two sets of issues fall under this general rubric: those having to do with the Saudi role outside their borders, and those having to do with domestic Saudi politics. The former are easier for the U.S. to raise, and easier for the Saudis to deal with. A major "external" issue in this regard is Saudi policing of financial transactions to Islamist groups and organizations, both from private sources within Saudi Arabia and from international Muslim organizations dominated by Saudi Arabia. The new goal must be to prevent money from going to terrorist groups. This issue is already on the agenda, but it is far from settled. If quiet diplomacy is not enough to get Riyadh's cooperation on the financing issues, then a public confrontation is called for, regardless of the short-term consequences. With the announcement by the Saudis in December 2002 of a number of counter-terrorist measures, there is at least an indication of movement in the right direction.<sup>17</sup> That movement would not have come without pressure from the United States, including public opinion pressure.

While drying up the financial resources for terrorist organizations is an important goal, even more central to the long-term "war on terrorism" is the "war of ideas" now taking place within the Muslim world. The Saudis must take a greater role in that debate, promoting more tolerant and less "jihadist" interpretations of Islam. During the 1990's, Riyadh vigorously opposed 'Usama bin Ladin and his political movement within Saudi Arabia, but refused to take on his ideas elsewhere. His extremist interpretations of the concept of "jihad" and his virulent anti-Americanism have since gained wide currency in many corners of the Muslim world. Bin Ladin's views had the imprimatur of political success, both from the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Afghanistan jihad of the 1980's and from the subsequent Taliban takeover. They provided a coherent, if conspiratorial, explanation of what seemed to some in the Muslim world like a broad-based attack on Islamist movements in the 1990's: the successful government counterattacks on Islamist opposition in Algeria and Egypt, the Russian campaign in Chechnya, the revival of Palestinian-Israeli violence in 2000, the Kashmir issue, etc. Rather than face this ideological challenge head-on, the Saudis chose to duck it. They

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<sup>17</sup> John Mintz, "Saudis Deny Dragging Feet on Terrorism," Washington Post, December 4, 2002, p. A10.

hoped that bin Ladin's isolation in Afghanistan and the failure of his movement to dislodge any Muslim government would eventually lead to his marginalization. They were wrong.

Ignoring the bin Ladin challenge in the realm of ideas is no longer good enough. The fight against bin Laden is as much a war of ideas as a battle against an organization. The Saudis, with their prestige in the Muslim world as the custodians of Mecca and Medina, with their sponsorship of Muslim international organizations, with their money, have to be part of that war. The United States must actively encourage the Saudi government, and through them the religious establishment, to use their influence in Saudi-supported international Islamic organizations to combat bin Ladinist ideas.

The Saudis have gradually come to realize this fact, though only after an extremely counter-productive defensiveness in their immediate reaction to September 11. For example, the Islamic Jurisprudence Group of the World Muslim League, meeting in Mecca in January 2002, adopted a directive on *jihad* and terrorism that could have been written by the Bush Administration. It limited *jihad* to certain very specific circumstances, and even elucidated how a legitimate *jihad* forbade the killing of innocents and the destruction of property not directly linked to the battle.<sup>18</sup> At the behest of the Saudi government, prominent Saudi religious scholars, including many whom in the 1990's were part of the Islamist opposition to the Saudi regime, have condemned bin Laden. They urged young Saudis to reconsider the rush to "jihad" and called for Muslims to follow a "middle way" between secularism and bin Ladinist extremism.<sup>19</sup> The Saudi religious establishment has also been the only one in the Arab world to unreservedly condemn suicide bombings by Palestinians against Israeli civilians.<sup>20</sup> One hopes that these messages will now be reflected in their external funding for ideas and organizations, such as through the Saudi-supported network of mosques and madrassahs across the Islamic world

### ***The U.S. and Saudi Domestic Politics: Striking the Balance***

The issues of terrorist financing and the "battle of ideas" in the Muslim world are, at least in part, foreign policy issues for the Saudis, and thus areas where American pressure can have positive effects. For the United States, the more difficult question we face is the extent to which we seek to make domestic political changes inside Saudi Arabia the centerpiece of our bilateral relationship. The underlying question is how much of the U.S.-Saudi agenda should focus on greater political freedoms, educational reform, women's rights and, most sensitive of all these sensitive issues, the official Saudi interpretation of Islam, "Wahhabism."

The argument that the United States must push the Saudis for substantial changes in their own domestic political and social life is based upon two premises, both of which are flawed. The first is that Saudi Arabia, with its particularly narrow interpretation of Islam, is the wellspring of Islamist terrorism. The *prima facie* case for this premise, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, was strong. Bin Ladin is a Saudi, 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, and the "Wahhabi" interpretation of Islam is well known for its narrowness. However, like most single cause

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<sup>18</sup>Text of the directive can be found in *al-Hayat*, January 11, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> I discuss some examples from the period immediately after the September 11 attacks in my article "Be Careful What You Wish For: The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Spring 2002).

<sup>20</sup>That stance on Palestinian suicide bombings has led to criticism of the Saudi religious establishment, even in Saudi Arabia. See for example "Saudi scholars disagree with Grand Mufti's ruling on suicide attacks," *Arab News*, May 1, 2001. See also the criticism leveled at a Saudi religious scholar who argued against the permissibility of suicide bombings in a conference in Qatar. Imam Muhammad Imam, "jadal sakhin hawl al-'amaliyyat al-fida'iyya fi mu'tamar mujama' al-fiqh al-'islami bil-doha," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 13, 2003.

explanations, the contention that Saudi Arabia is the root of Islamist extremism falls apart on closer examination.

The ideological origins of bin Ladin's toxic mix of fundamentalism and violence are not exclusively Saudi or "Wahhabi." Rather, the roots of bin Ladinism can be found in a mix of extremist offshoots of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the experience of "jihad" against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980's, and general region-wide anti-Americanism. The Brotherhood contribution, represented by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Egypt's "Islamic Group" and bin Ladin's second-in-command in al-Qa'ida, is the idea that most Muslims, including Muslim governments, are not following the true path of Islam. Therefore, they can be considered apostates from Islam and subject to violent attack. The Afghan experience convinced bin Ladin and his followers that armed resistance by a small group of the faithful can achieve great, even miraculous, political success. When the "Afghan Arabs" failed to bring down governments in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, bin Ladin changed his focus toward the United States. This strategic move broadened his appeal, allowing him to tap into broader sentiments of anti-Americanism (fed by anti-Israeli feeling).

Bin Ladin's message appealed to many Saudis. Undoubtedly the narrowness and intolerance of difference characteristic of official Saudi Islam contributed to the receptivity among these Saudis to his message. But it is also important to remember that it also appealed to many Afghans, Algerians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Kuwaitis, Moroccans, Pakistanis, Palestinians, Yemenis, etc. Al-Qa'ida's membership cuts across state and ethnic lines. Unfortunately, bin Ladin's appeal is not limited to those raised and educated in the official Saudi version of Islam. It is more political than simply religious or doctrinal. Indeed, in its political message, it runs directly against official interpretations of Islam in Saudi Arabia.

In terms of politics, "Wahhabism" has shed its revolutionary roots and become a state ideology. It now counsels obedience to Muslim rulers and political quietism. "Wahhabism" in its current incarnation could disappear, but as long as the political circumstances that give rise to the bin Ladinist current in the Muslim world persist, that would not solve the problem of anti-American terrorism from the Muslim world. Quashing or changing "Wahhabism" in Saudi Arabia is not the silver bullet that will bring victory in the war on terrorism. In fact, the ideological atmosphere in the Kingdom would be much less tolerant of bin Ladinist ideas if the "Wahhabi" religious establishment were much more vigorous, particularly in confronting its members who are sympathetic to bin Ladin.

The more general question about the role of "Wahhabism" in Saudi domestic politics is one for the Saudis to confront, not the United States. The official Saudi interpretation of Islam undoubtedly encourages intolerance toward other Muslims who do not accept it, particularly the Shi'a. This intolerance is a major issue for "non-Wahhabi" Saudis, particularly the Shi'a minority, but also Saudi Sunnis who follow other law schools and interpretations. As serious as this is for the future of Saudi Arabia, as long as official "Wahhabism" is not a direct source of terrorism against the United States, this is an issue that must be left for Saudis themselves. For the United States to inject itself directly into doctrinal debates within the Muslim world would be enormously counter-productive. We have no credibility in such debates, and can only make life difficult for those in Saudi Arabia who are arguing for a reduced role for the religious establishment in Saudi public life.



The second flawed premise behind assertions that the United States should demand major domestic political, social, and religious changes in Saudi Arabia is that the Saudi regime is teetering on the edge of dissolution. Only with fundamental reforms, this argument runs, can the Saudis survive. Since they seem incapable of instituting these reforms themselves, the United States must force them to do so.

This is just not so. The Saudis have a number of serious domestic problems, including a decaying social services infrastructure, rising unemployment, and a blocked political system. The United States can, judiciously and carefully, prod the Saudis to take steps that will improve the prospects for political stability down the line. But right now, the Al Saud face no serious challenge to their rule in Arabia. By the end of the 1990s, they had rolled up the domestic manifestations of Islamist and bin Ladinist opposition. After September 11, they reasserted their control over the religious establishment in the country, and even rallied former opponents to their side. Through skillful oil diplomacy (and timely increases in world oil demand), they were able to push oil prices up over 100% from late 1998, when prices briefly fell to \$10 per barrel, thus averting a fiscal crisis.

The other concern is the uncertain position of Crown Prince Abdullah, who still lacks the formal authority of kingship. The ruling family is struggling with the difficult situation of a largely incapacitated king and a crown prince who has day-to-day governing responsibilities. While Crown Prince Abdullah is clearly the major decision-maker in Saudi Arabia, his authority is not absolute. Policy initiatives launched by him, in some cases, remain bogged down in the Saudi bureaucracy. This indicates that, on major issues, he still needs to sustain a consensus among the senior princes to carry through serious policy changes. However, there are no signs of a major public split among the senior princes or a struggle over succession when King Fahd dies, the kinds of rifts at the top that could call into question regime stability. In fact, the Saudi regime is stable now and for the immediate future. There is time to deal with domestic social, economic and political problems.

### ***Creating a "Normal" U.S.-Saudi Relationship***

Since there is time, the United States can afford to deal carefully and prudently with the Saudis on domestic issues. Those issues can be divided into three categories – economic, political and social. They call for three different approaches from Washington.

Economic issues are the least sensitive issues in terms of potential backlash from Saudi public opinion, and the area where the Saudis need the most serious American prodding. The Saudis have to create job opportunities for the growing numbers of Saudi youths, among whom unemployment is becoming a serious problem. Saudi economic reformers would welcome American input on opening up their economy, attracting both foreign investment and, more importantly, the billions of dollars Saudis keep abroad. One important avenue through which to raise these issues is Saudi accession to the World Trade Organization. In those negotiations, the United States can prod the Saudis to be more open to investment, to make their legal system compatible with economic change, to be more transparent in financial and budgetary matters, and to attack the problem of corruption, including within the ruling family. There are important forces within Saudi Arabia, including the Crown Prince, who want to move this way. The United States can help push these economic issues, and can do so openly.

On political issues, the Saudi leadership realizes that they need to develop new avenues for political participation in their society. This includes expanding the role of and opening the selection

process for their appointed consultative council. Crown Prince Abdullah acknowledged this in his recent proposal to the Arab League summit, scheduled for March 2003.<sup>21</sup> A number of the smaller Gulf monarchies have taken such steps, without encouraging political upheaval and perhaps strengthening the stability of their regimes. The attention focused on Saudi Arabia by the world media since September 11 has had a salutary effect in pressuring the Saudi government for greater openness in the country. There is greater freedom in the Saudi press now to discuss political issues. Real public opinion polls are being taken in the country, and published. Human Rights Watch for the first time has been allowed to send a delegation to the country. Saudi reformers have brought a proposal for greater political freedoms to Crown Prince Abdullah, who publicly received them.<sup>22</sup> These are all to the good, and would not have happened without the sense in Saudi Arabia that the United States wants to see political reform. However, Washington needs to be avoid misreading these limited if important successes as a signal for more active intervention in Saudi political life. Particularly, it needs to resist the temptation to press the Saudis to institute democratic elections now.

The first request in the reform petition is for direct elections to the Saudi Consultative Council. Such elections would be a natural evolution for the Council, established in 1993, whose members are all appointed. However, such a move would, in the immediate term, inevitably produce a political system even more in thrall to the religious establishment, and less open to American pressures, than the one that exists now. It is the religious establishment that has the organizational means to mount a countrywide political campaign. Their sympathizers have greater access to the Saudi media. They have access to money, the mother's milk of politics anywhere. Moreover, with anti-American sentiment running high in Saudi public opinion right now, anti-American platforms would be appealing to the electorate. Without changes in Saudi Arabia allowing other social groups greater opportunities for political organization and access to the media, elections will not produce the kinds of changes that American critics of Saudi Arabia would like to see. Those Americans who emphasize the virtues of democratic change for the region as a whole, have to face the stark reality. Early elections in Saudi Arabia would likely produce representative assemblies that would push the regime in anti-liberal directions.

It is in the area of social issues that American pressure would be most counterproductive. Domestic social change that is seen as being imposed by outsiders, particularly in areas like education and women's rights that many Saudis see as directly tied to their interpretation of Islam, would mobilize domestic opposition and backfire on those who propose it. The "women's driving incident" of 1990 is an excellent example of this dynamic. During the lead-up to Operation Desert Storm, American troops poured into Saudi Arabia and the American media was allowed unprecedented access to the country. A number of brave Saudi women then challenged one of the more hidebound restrictions in Saudi society, the prohibition on women driving cars. They met in a Riyadh parking lot, in the presence of Western reporters, and proceeded to drive down a street. The reaction in religious circles, already fearful that the crisis would bring "un-Islamic" elements into Saudi society, was intense. The government reacted by formalizing the ban on women driving. It was not until the late 1990's that women's rights issues returned again to public Saudi political

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<sup>21</sup>A text of the draft of the Saudi proposal was published in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 13, 2003, p. 3. An English translation can be found in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS-NES-2003-0113.

<sup>22</sup> On the reformists' meeting with Crown Prince Abdallah, see "Reformists in Free, Frank Talks with Abdallah," *Arab News* (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia), February 2, 2003 (<http://www.arabnews.com/Article.asp?ID=22454>). The Arabic text of the petition can be found in *al-Quds al-'Arabi* (London), January 30, 2003, p. 13. On the Human Rights Watch delegation, see Michael Cousins, "Human Rights Team Holds Frank Talks with Saudi Officials," *Arab News*, January 27, 2003 (<http://www.arabnews.com/Article.asp?ID=22274&ArY=2003&ArM=1&ArD=27>).

discourse. Importantly, it was encouraged by high-ranking members of the ruling family, who saw the need for change. The reform petition presented to Abdullah in January 2003 calls for a reassessment of the role of women in Saudi society, though within the guidelines of Islamic law. Likewise, the moves towards women's rights in other GCC states, such as Qatar, may provide a model. However, these issues cannot be imposed from the outside. It is only grass roots activism that can make changes on this issue more palatable within Saudi society.

Education is another hot button issue. There is no doubt that the Saudi educational system needs to be shaken up. Saudis themselves have been talking about this for some time, long before September 11. Graduates are not well prepared for the modern job market, exacerbating the youth unemployment problem. Religious instruction takes up a large part of the teaching day, and that instruction reinforces a narrow interpretation of Islam.<sup>23</sup> The Saudi leadership is moving, however slowly, on this issue. Crown Prince Abdullah used the public outcry surrounding the death of 15 young girls in a fire at a school in Mecca in March 2002 as a cover to remove the girls' education system from the direct control of the religious establishment, and place it under the Ministry of Education. Private education is growing in the kingdom, with the approval of the government, as a means to better prepare Saudi youth for the job market. For the United States to make the Saudi educational system, particularly the religious element of it, an element of the bilateral relationship, would be profoundly counterproductive. Nothing would more quickly mobilize Islamist forces in the kingdom – official and oppositional – than the perception that America was trying to dictate the content of the Saudi religious curriculum. Saudi Islamists are already raising this charge.<sup>24</sup> If the Saudi government asks for American help in educational reform, Washington should be ready to give it. But to make educational reform a central part of the bilateral relationship is asking for trouble, and would lead to results opposite from those desired.

What the United States should be seeking from Saudi Arabia is neither the “special relationship” of the recent past nor the open enmity that some ideologues seek. Washington should be aiming for a “normal” relationship with Riyadh. On issues of common interest like oil and economic issues, cooperation will be public and close. On security matters, we should certainly cooperate, but not see Saudi Arabia as a useful base for American forces. We should not assert a right to manage their domestic affairs.

Normality also means that, when we disagree with the Saudis, we do so openly. We need not fear that open disagreement will destabilize the regime. It might even increase the ruling elite's *bona fides* with its own public, which is distrustful of the United States. For example, one can question the wisdom of Congressionally mandated lists of “bad” countries as a tool of foreign policy. However, given that such lists are a fact of American political life, it makes no sense to leave Saudi Arabia off the list of states that do not practice religious toleration. We do not have to coddle the Saudis. But we do have to recognize their role in the region, in the larger Muslim world, and in the world oil market, and to realize that it is far better for American interests to have a Saudi government with which we can work.

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<sup>23</sup> Much has been written about the content of Saudi religious instruction, but the only systematic effort to survey Saudi textbooks in religious topics has been conducted by Eleanor Abdella Doumato of the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Her paper, “Manning the Barricades: Islam According to Saudi Arabia's School Texts,” will undoubtedly be published soon.

<sup>24</sup> See the petition signed by 209 Islamist activists, 160 of whom are Saudis, in *al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), November 22, 2002, p. 2.

## **II. The U.S. and the Smaller Gulf Monarchies: Safe Ports in a Threatening Storm?**

### ***The Expanding Network***

As the American relationship with Saudi Arabia contracts, particularly on the military side, America's reliance on its military relations with the smaller Gulf monarchies inevitably expands. Since 1991, the United States has developed an extensive network of Gulf military bases (although Washington eschews that term, in favor of "access agreements" and "facilities" and other such euphemisms, everyone in the region calls these installations in their country "the American base"). These cover much of the G.C.C.:

- Kuwait has hosted American troops on a regular basis since 1991, at a permanent facility north of Kuwait City (Camp Doha). The U.S. has also prepositioned equipment for an armored brigade. With the build-up of U.S. and allied forces in Kuwait for an attack on Iraq, nearly one-third of the territory of the country has been declared a closed military zone.
- The headquarters of the vastly expanded American naval presence in the Gulf, the Fifth Fleet, is in Manama, Bahrain's capital. There is normally at least one carrier battle group in the Gulf area at all times. Approximately 4,000 U.S. military personnel are attached regularly to the headquarters in Bahrain.
- Qatar signed an agreement in December 2002 to upgrade American facilities in the country, which include a major airfield at Al Udaid, a command and control center (duplicating facilities in Saudi, in case the U.S. is denied access to them), and prepositioning depots for the equipment for two armored brigades.
- Oman provides access to American forces and prepositioned material at airbases at Al Seeb and Thamarit and on Masirah Island in the Arabian Sea.
- The port and airport facilities in the UAE provide vital logistical support for American forces, and that country hosts more recreational visits by American troops than any other foreign country.

## Gulf Cooperation Council States --Quick Facts <sup>25</sup>

GCC Country	Population	GDP per Capita	Oil Production <sup>26</sup>	U.S. Military Presence <sup>27</sup>	Notable Issues
BAHRAIN	660,000, about 65% citizen	\$13,000	Very small oil production, most from joint offshore field with Saudi Arabia	Headquarters of U.S. 5 <sup>th</sup> Fleet; and other basing access; approximately 4200 U.S. military personnel	Recently reopened, elected parliament, but major Shi'i groups boycotted the election; Growing unemployment problem
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	3 million, 27% citizen <sup>28</sup>	\$21,100	2.1 million barrels per day	U.S. military access to port and airport facilities; approximately 500 U.S. military personnel	Only small Gulf state without some elected representative body; Dubai is the most dynamic economic center in the Gulf region
KUWAIT	2.1 million, 45% citizens	\$15,100	1.9 million barrels per day	U.S. military base north of Kuwait City, prepositioning for two armored brigades; use of more than 25% of land area for military training; approximately 35,000 U.S. military personnel	Strong Islamist representation in parliament, but divided among Sunni Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, Sunni <i>salafis</i> , Shi'is and independents
OMAN	2.7 million, about 80% citizen	\$8,200	763,000 barrels per day	U.S. military access to major airbases and ports; approximately 3000 U.S. military	Most dispersed population of all the small Gulf states, with major population centers in interior and south as well as around the

<sup>25</sup> Sources on text boxes: Data taken from CIA, World Fact Book 2002, [www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>26</sup> Oil production figures for Kuwait, Qatar and UAE from Energy Information Administration, Department of Energy, [www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/international/petroleum.html#IntlProduction](http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/international/petroleum.html#IntlProduction). 2002 average through September. Oman figure taken from official Omani announcement of 2002 budget results and 2003 budget projections. Al-Hayat, January 5, 2003, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> These numbers reflect the normal figures stationed within these countries, not the additional forces that will constitute an Iraq invasion force.

<sup>28</sup> UAE population figure taken from Population Reference Bureau, World Population Data Sheet, 2002, [www.prb.org/pdf/WorldPopulationDS02\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf/WorldPopulationDS02_Eng.pdf). Citizen population figure taken from State Department, Background Notes, [www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5444.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5444.htm). There are wide discrepancies in population estimates for the UAE. The CIA World Fact Book puts the population at only 2.5 million, the lowest of any published source. Official UAE sources put the population at approximately 3.4 million.

				personnel	capital Growing unemployment problem
QATAR	800,000, about 25% citizen	\$21,200	660,000 barrels per day; Also, third largest reserves of natural gas in the world	U.S. airbase, command and control center and prepositioning area for up to two armored brigades; approximately 3500 U.S. military personnel	
SAUDI ARABIA	23 million, 80% citizen	\$10,600	8 million barrels per day; approximately 26% of the world's proven petroleum reserves	U.S. airbases, command and control centers, and prepositioned equipment; approximately 5,000 U.S. military personnel	The U.S. is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner, and Saudi Arabia is the largest U.S. export market in the Middle East.
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	3 million, 27% citizen <sup>29</sup>	\$21,100	2.1 million barrels per day	U.S. military access to port and airport facilities; approximately 500 U.S. military personnel	Only small Gulf state without some elected representative body; Dubai is the most dynamic economic center in the Gulf region

<sup>29</sup> UAE population figure taken from Population Reference Bureau, World Population Data Sheet, 2002, [www.prb.org/pdf/WorldPopulationDS02\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf/WorldPopulationDS02_Eng.pdf). Citizen population figure taken from State Department, Background Notes, [www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5444.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5444.htm). There are wide discrepancies in population estimates for the UAE. The CIA World Fact Book puts the population at only 2.5 million, the lowest of any published source. Official UAE sources put the population at approximately 3.4 million.

### *Why the Welcome?*

The willingness of the governments of the smaller Gulf monarchies to accommodate American military facilities cuts across substantial differences they have in their foreign policy orientations. Kuwait, for understandable reasons, sees Iraq as the major threat to its security – not as serious a threat after the fall of Saddam Hussein, but a threat nonetheless. The Iraqi claim to Kuwait did not begin with Saddam, and most Kuwaitis believe it will not end with him. The UAE sees Iran as its major security threat, and has called for the GCC states to reconcile with Iraq. Bahrain is extremely close to Saudi Arabia on all foreign policy issues. Qatar delights in emphasizing its independence from the Saudis.

The splits within the GCC on security issues were evident for all to see at the summit meeting of December 2002. The Saudi and Bahraini leaderships boycotted the meeting, sending lower-level representatives. The six states could not produce a joint position on the looming war between Iraq and the United States (Ironically, though, the meeting was one of the most productive in GCC history on economic issues, as the six agreed to implement a common external tariff and a free trade agreement among them.). Yet all the smaller Gulf states consider their American security tie as their ultimate insurance policy. As small, rich states surrounded by larger and potentially hostile neighbors, they appreciate the precariousness of their security situation. The downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, while improving their security situation, does not change these facts of geography and history. These governments see a greater and more immediate need for American protection than the Saudi government does, and are willing to pay a greater price for it.

Indeed, as long as Washington's relationship with Iran, the largest and most powerful Gulf state, remains hostile, there will be a need for an American military presence in the area. A friendly regime in Baghdad might mitigate that need, but will not eliminate it. The first major American military deployment in the area occurred in 1987, when the United States was still cooperating with Saddam's regime. The fact that the Iranian regime seems now to be openly pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons will only intensify American worries about security in the area, and will reinforce for the Gulf monarchies the importance of their American security link. Despite problems with the United States, none of the Gulf state publics, much less their governments, would like to see the region dominated by Iran. If Iran continues on the nuclear course, some of the public antipathy toward the United States on the Arab side could recede, making the American security presence in the Gulf even more sustainable politically. Until there is a fundamental change in American-Iranian relations, or until the world economy ceases to run on oil, the U.S. is fated to be directly involved politically and militarily in the Gulf.

Moreover, none of these facilities has engendered the broad political backlash from which the U.S. has suffered in Saudi Arabia – at least not yet. For example, Bahrain experienced years of low-level violence emanating from Shi'i Muslim opponents of the government. However, not once was there an attack on the Fifth Fleet headquarters, or on American military personnel in the country.

There are two reasons for the greater acceptance of a foreign military in these smaller states than in Saudi Arabia. First, they are more accustomed to it. It was not so long ago that Great

Britain had a formal protectorate role in these states, within the living memory of their elites. In fact, in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, foreigners outnumber citizens. The kind of social disruptions that an American military presence brings are not nearly as unusual in these countries as they are in Saudi Arabia. Second, they are relatively small in terms of area (Oman is an exception here) and population. The rulers' patronage systems can encompass most of the citizens directly. Personal connections can mitigate political opposition, and improve intelligence gathering. Security services have fewer people to monitor. Violent opposition would find it harder to hide. This is not to say that political tensions are absent in the smaller Gulf monarchies. Each has its own problems. However, compared with Saudi Arabia, they are simply easier to manage politically.

### ***Repeating the Backlash?***

The smaller Gulf states are therefore better suited to sustain a long-term American military presence than is Saudi Arabia. However, that fact does not mean that the American presence in these states is unproblematic. The same public opinion issues that work against the United States in Saudi Arabia are also at work in the smaller Gulf countries. The Zogby survey of March 2002 cited above on Saudi Arabia found that in Kuwait 65% of their sample had an unfavorable view of "American-led efforts to fight terrorism," as opposed to 30% favorable. In the UAE, 48% had an unfavorable view, only 37% favorable. In both countries, over 75% of the sample had an unfavorable view of American policy toward Arab states, and over 80% unfavorable views of American policy toward the Palestinian issue.<sup>30</sup>

Anti-American sentiment since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in these states has also been reflected in increasing attacks on American personnel and institutions, something that was extremely rare in the 1990's. In November 2002, a UAE customs official opened fire on a U.S. military helicopter at the Fujairah airport (Fujairah is one of the seven emirates making up the country).<sup>31</sup> A similar, isolated incident occurred at an U.S. prepositioning facility in Qatar in October 2001.<sup>32</sup> In Kuwait, where general support for the security link with the United States remains high, one Marine was killed and another wounded during a military exercise in early October 2002, when Kuwaitis sympathetic with 'Usama bin Laden fired on them. Kuwaiti authorities claim to have foiled a number of other planned attacks on American interests.<sup>33</sup> Yet in November 2002 and in January 2003 there were other attacks on American personnel, leaving one American contractor dead and an American civilian and two soldiers wounded.<sup>34</sup> Bahrainis protesting American support for Israel attacked the U.S. Embassy in Manama in April 2002, with one demonstrator killed as Bahraini security forces restored order. Subsequent demonstrations called for the removal of Fifth Fleet headquarters.<sup>35</sup> As war with Iraq approached, an anti-war demonstration in Manama burned American flags and called explicitly for the expulsion of American forces from the island.<sup>36</sup>

None of these incidents should be read as signs of imminent political upheaval in the smaller Gulf monarchies. However, they do signal that the political management of the American military presence in these countries is becoming more complicated. What happens on the Arab-Israeli front, and elsewhere in the region, will affect the political climate of the American presence in these

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<sup>30</sup> "The 10 Nation 'Impressions of America' Poll Report," Zogby International, August 7, 2002, [www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=610](http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=610).

<sup>31</sup> "Gunman arrested in Emirates targets U.S. helicopter," Associated Press, November 26, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> "qatari yutliq al-nar 'ala qa'ida jawiyya tadamm mustawda'an lil-'itad al-'amriki," *al-Hayat*, November 8, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> "Kuwait says it foiled more attacks," Reuters, October 14, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "2 U.S. Computer Workers are Shot, One Fatally, in Kuwait," *New York Times*, January 22, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Death in Bahrain Brings Demand that U.S. Leave," *New York Times*, April 8, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Carol J. Williams, "Antiwar Bahrainis Stage a Rare Protest," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2003.



countries. Those complications will grow if the United States follows up on its declaratory policy of encouraging greater democratization in the Arab world by pressing the smaller Gulf monarchies to open up their political systems.

The smaller Gulf monarchies have, with the exception of the UAE, been more open than Saudi Arabia to elected representative bodies. In some cases, this is the result of the colonial transition, which in Kuwait and Bahrain left behind elected parliaments. The leaders of both of those states saw the need to revive those parliamentary traditions in the face of recent political crises – for Kuwait, the Iraqi invasion of 1990; for Bahrain, the occasionally violent political protests of the mid-1990's and the economic problems that helped beget them. None of the smaller states have institutionalized the power of the religious establishment in the political system the way that Saudi Arabia has. Perhaps most importantly, strong leaders in Bahrain, Qatar and Oman were convinced that opening up the political system, in a gradual and managed way, was the best strategy for security political stability. Openings came in Bahrain and Qatar with advent of new leaders, while in Oman, Sultan Qabus moved slowly through stages in the 1990's to an elected consultative council. None of these openings should be confused with democracy, however. Parliaments and councils are limited in their power, balanced in the cases of Bahrain and Oman by appointed bodies. The United Arab Emirates, the wealthiest of the smaller states, has avoided any moves toward greater political participation at all.

Such moves toward greater political openness will not necessarily make the conduct of American foreign policy in these states any easier. For example, one-half of the elected representatives to the Kuwaiti parliament in October 2001, almost exclusively from Islamist political groups, supported a declaration of opposition to the American military campaign against the Taliban government of Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> Bahrain held municipal and parliamentary elections in 2002, in a widely praised (at least in the United States) return to a more open political life. In the municipal elections, held in May, Shi'i Islamists dominated the polls. The major Shi'i group boycotted the parliamentary elections of October, in protest against constitutional changes that will reduce the power of the elected legislature. With that boycott, Sunni Islamist groups won half the seats in the new parliament.<sup>38</sup> With the Bahraini opposition openly questioning the validity of the new constitutional arrangement, the future of this electoral experiment remains unclear.

The Bahraini elections might improve the prospects for long term stability in the country, depending on how relations between the government and the Shi'i opposition develop. However, the prospect of having the major political opposition group, by its own choice, outside the parliamentary process could vitiate the stabilizing effects of this political opening. Neither Kuwaiti nor Bahraini Islamists, Sunni or Shi'a, campaigned openly against the American military presence in their country during recent elections. This might stem from these groups' recognition that only American protection can secure their countries from potentially hostile neighbors. Or, it might simply be a tactical concession to governments that have thrown in their lot with the United States. Until Gulf parliaments get real power in foreign policy, which they do not now have, we cannot know.

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<sup>37</sup> "al-kuwayt: nisf al-nuwab al-muntakhabin yarfudun al-harb," *al-Hayat*, October 24, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> On the municipal elections, see Mohammed Almezal, "Battered Groups Gear Up for October Polls," *Gulf News* (Bahrain), June 4, 2002. On the parliamentary elections, see *al-Hayat*, October 26, 2001, pp. 1, 2, 6; and *al-Hayat*, November 1, 2002, pp. 1, 6.

What is clear is that elections in the Gulf states will, at least at the outset, yield parliaments composed of groups who are less likely to be supportive of American foreign policy objectives in the region than the ruling regimes are now. As the recent American experience with Turkey suggests, such parliaments will constrain the ability of Gulf rulers to cooperate with American foreign and military policies that run against public opinion in these countries. This is not to say that the United States should oppose participatory politics and greater openness in the Gulf monarchies. The potential stabilizing and reformative effects of such openness outweighs the problems that it will cause for the United States in these countries. They are worth the risk. However, Washington should be modest and realistic about what electoral openings in the smaller Gulf states will mean, and should not hinge its policy toward those states on demands for fully democratic elections. Most importantly, political reform needs to come, and be seen to come, from these countries themselves, not as a result of an American imposition, if it is to have any prospect for long-term success.

### ***Pax Americana in the Gulf? Lessons from the British Experience***

Washington increasingly finds itself in a position in the Gulf that bears many similarities to that of Great Britain, the previous foreign “keeper of the peace” in the region. This is not an untenable position. London maintained its dominance on the Gulf coast for well over a century, supporting friendly local rulers and protecting them from regional opponents. It avoided military commitments further inland in Arabia. As the difficulties in Saudi-American relations become more prominent, the American military commitment to the littoral Gulf states will only increase, and America will more closely mimic the British strategy.

This will occur no matter how a war with Iraq goes. For all practical purposes, Iraq has no secure naval access to the Gulf. Iraq is at the northern end of the Gulf. The key oil transit point, the Strait of Hormuz, is hundreds of miles south. Abandoning air and naval facilities closer to Hormuz makes no sense. There are no guarantees that a post-Saddam Iraqi government, even one friendly to Washington, will want to host American military bases on a permanent basis. Moreover, Washington will not likely abandon the billions of dollars of infrastructure that have been constructed for its military purposes in these states over the past decade, simply because the Iraqi regime has changed. Therefore, America will continue to rely on the smaller monarchies to maintain the bulk of its armed forces in the Gulf.

Moreover, Iran remains a major strategic challenge to both the United States and to the smaller Gulf states, regardless of the outcome of the Iraq war. Bahrain, with its Shi'i majority, and the United Arab Emirates, with its territorial dispute with Iran over three Gulf islands (Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb), both see Teheran as a greater threat than Baghdad. With Iran now practically publicly admitting what most in the Gulf have long suspected, that it is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons, the American security guarantee takes on even greater importance. Even if the United States does not formally extend a nuclear umbrella over the smaller Gulf states, its presence in these states is a de facto deterrent to any thoughts in Teheran of nuclear blackmail against them. A friendly regime in Baghdad will not lessen their desire to keep the U.S. close.

The British policy of military commitment on the coast served its interests very well. Washington could learn much from the British example. Unlike other parts of the empire, the Gulf states never became colonies. Britain ruled through local elites, and did little to try to reform local political systems into their own image. This generally “hands-off” approach mitigated the inevitable

friction between the British and the local populations. While the British were run out of other parts of their empire by nationalist opposition, they left their positions of power and influence in the Gulf states on their own timetable.

However, the United States must also be mindful of being drawn into the more negative aspects of the British protectorate experience. London often ended up acting as arbiter for internal disputes among the Gulf ruling families. It deposed rulers who ran afoul of its policies, and protected its chosen successors from their family rivals. Into the 1960's and early 1970's, the British were still engineering political changes in the Gulf states. For example, they brought Shaykh Zayid, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the UAE, to power in 1966 and Sultan Qabus, ruler of Oman, to power in 1970.

Those who would deny that Washington would have any similar "imperial" tendencies should consider the coup in Qatar that brought Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to power in 1995. Shaykh Hamad deposed his father in a bloodless palace takeover, similar to a number of previous family disputes among the Al Thani. While there is no evidence in the public record that the United States orchestrated this change of power, Washington immediately recognized Hamad as the new ruler of Qatar. This discouraged domestic opposition or foreign (possibly Saudi) intervention. It is hard to imagine that Shaykh Hamad could have pulled off his coup in the face of American opposition. This change has worked out well, both for the United States and for Qatar. Shaykh Hamad has opened up the Qatari political system and aggressively developed the country's natural gas reserves. Important to American strategic interests, he has also permitted unparalleled access for American forces to his country.

However, interfering in local political disputes is a risky gamble. History demonstrates that the United States does not enjoy any special clairvoyant power in identifying "good" as opposed to "bad" potential rulers, in the Gulf or elsewhere. Getting involved in ruling family politics in the Gulf states will open up a hornet's nest of potential problems.

Unfortunately, the chances that local ruling family factions will try to involve Washington in their internal conflicts are substantial, as most of the smaller Gulf monarchies face potential succession issues:

- In Kuwait, both the ruler and the Crown Prince are old and ailing. Factional disputes within the ruling family have at times in the past few years paralyzed decision-making. The problems within the Al Sabah family have become a matter of public discussion in the Kuwaiti press and political circles.<sup>39</sup>
- In Qatar, Shaykh Hamad's successful palace coup in 1995 was not universally accepted in the emirate. In February 1996, the government announced that it had broken up a coup plot aimed at restoring Shaykh Hamad's father, Shaykh Khalifa, to power. Khalifa remains in exile. Hamad, who underwent kidney surgery in 1997, designated his third eldest son Jassim, now 24 years old, as his successor. Given the fractious family history of the Al Thani, with a

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<sup>39</sup> In August 2000, the major liberal political group in Kuwait, the Democratic Platform, called on the ruling family to settle its internal problems which were having a deleterious effect on the administration of the country. *al-Hayat*, August 24, 2000, p. 2. In April 2001 the Islamic Constitutional Movement, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country, issued a similar call. *al-Hayat*, April 14, 2001, pp. 1, 6. See also Neil MacFarquhar, "Infirmary of its Senior Sheikhs Leaves Kuwait Stagnating," *New York Times*, June 13, 2002.

grandfather and two older brothers before him, Jassim might have difficulties in consolidating his rule should his father depart the scene in an untimely manner.

- In the UAE, Shaykh Zayid Al Nahayan, ruler of Abu Dhabi since 1966 and the only president the UAE has known, is 80 years old and increasingly frail. It is generally assumed that his designated successor as amir of Abu Dhabi, his son Khalifa, will also become president of the UAE. However, Khalifa will not have the personal status that his father enjoys as the founder of the country. His younger brother, Muhammad, chief of staff of the UAE defense forces, and the crown prince of Dubai, Muhammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who serves as UAE Minister of Defense, are both talented and ambitious political figures, who could emerge as rivals.
- In Oman, Sultan Qabus has no heir and has not designated a crown prince from the extended Al Sa'id family.
- Only in Bahrain, where the king, Shaykh Hamad, became ruler upon his father's death in 1999, is the succession issue seemingly unproblematic. Shaykh Hamad is still a young man. His crown prince, his son Salman, is a dynamic figure with degrees from Cambridge University and American University in Washington. Shaykh Hamad's uncle, Khalifa, remains Prime Minister, as he was under Hamad's father, and is a power in his own right. However, he does not appear to be a challenger to Hamad's rule.

While this open field of political leaders might tempt the U.S. to act as a power broker in local politics, it should resist. Getting drawn into intra-family disputes over succession will only complicate the American role in the region. When and if factions within the Gulf ruling families approach it, Washington must be adamant that it wants no role in such intramural conflicts. It must make clear, to Gulf elites and publics, that it does not seek a British-style imperial role in their domestic political systems. The United States makes agreements with governments, not with individuals.

Intentionally or not, the United States is increasingly seen as the arbiter of politics in the smaller Gulf states, not simply their protector against foreign threats but the guarantor of the particular political order there. Great Britain played this role for over a century, and at very little cost. However, the political situation at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the Gulf is very different than it was even the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Population growth, widespread education, urbanization, and the new media facilitating access to information have all created more politicized and mobilized citizenries in the smaller Gulf states. Political management of these populations is not nearly as easy as it was 50 years ago. They are not immune to the factors that have led to increased anti-Americanism elsewhere in the Arab world, including next door in Saudi Arabia.

As the American military presence in these states grows, and comes to be seen both in Washington and the region as permanent, the United States faces the temptation to become increasingly involved in their domestic politics. That temptation could be for the best of reasons – reform, democratization, human rights, etc. The prudent course is for the United States to support those reform efforts that emerge from the ruling elites themselves, as in Bahrain and Qatar, and to respect the role of elected legislatures, even if (as in Kuwait) they occasionally complicate relations between Washington and the local governments.

However, prudence also demands being extremely cautious about assuming a high-profile role in “advising” Gulf rulers about how to run their countries. The end result of any process of political change is unknowable at the outset. There is always the chance that the best-intentioned efforts will go awry. We must be aware that, to the extent that domestic political change in these countries is seen as being produced in Washington, we become responsible for it. If it goes badly, we will be expected to clean up the mess. It is said that the British Empire was acquired in a fit of absentmindedness. The United States has to guard against replicating that element of Britain’s Gulf strategy.

### III. Conclusions

America's direct military role in Gulf security began with the collapse of the U.S.-Iranian relationship with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. As long as Washington's relationship with this largest and most powerful Gulf state remains hostile, there will be a need for an American military presence in the area. A friendly regime in Baghdad might mitigate that need, but will not eliminate it. Indeed, the first major American military deployment in the area occurred in 1987, when the United States was still cooperating with Saddam's regime. The fact that the Iranian regime seems now to be openly pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons will only intensify American worries about security in the area, and will reinforce for the Gulf monarchies the importance of their American security link. Until there is a fundamental change in American-Iranian relations, or until the world economy ceases to run on oil, the U.S. is fated to be directly involved politically and militarily in the Gulf.

The structure of the U.S. involvement in the Gulf, as it has developed since the Gulf War of 1990-91, however, has to change. It is politically impossible to maintain the kind of open military relationship with Saudi Arabia that has developed over the last 12 years. The attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and their fallout in both our country and Saudi Arabia have made the political costs of maintaining a permanent American military presence in the kingdom too great, both for the U.S. and for the Saudis. Of necessity, the U.S. will have to rely more on the smaller Gulf countries to support its military presence in the region.

The new, post-Iraq war security structure for American policy toward the GCC states should rest on these bases:

- A return to a security relationship with Saudi Arabia characteristic of the pre-Gulf War period: close and cooperative, but without American military forces stationed in the kingdom.
- Avoiding the temptation to see Saudi Arabia as an enemy. Our decades-long relationship with the Saudis gives us important leverage with them on oil issues and on the war on terrorism. We need to use this leverage to push them to further cooperation with the United States. A policy of open hostility toward Riyadh forfeits that leverage, with no prospect of producing a friendlier government in Arabia.
- A nuanced position on domestic political reform in Saudi Arabia, that openly emphasizes economic change, discretely encourages political reform but not a rush to elections, and stays away from highly charged social-cultural issues like women's rights and the education system. We should not hesitate to state our support for American values on these issues latter issues rhetorically, and to encourage change that comes from within the Saudi system, but we need to avoid making them the centerpiece of the relationship.
- Recognition that the smaller Gulf monarchies provide a less troublesome and more politically sustainable environment for American military facilities than Saudi Arabia.

- Avoiding the fallacy that nothing has changed in the smaller Gulf states since their days as British protectorates. Public opinion is important there. The sustainability of the American presence will depend, in part, on convincing those publics that the American presence is both beneficial to their countries and not harmful to the Arab and Muslim worlds more generally.
- Avoiding the temptation in the smaller Gulf states to play a more “British” role directly in their local politics, whether by intervening in factional disputes within the ruling families or by “advising” the local leaders on how they should govern their societies. Supporting political reform efforts that emerge indigenously from these political systems is good, even if greater democratization at times will complicate our relations. Seeming to impose changes from the outside, however, is a dangerous and unpredictable game. We must take pains to emphasize at every turn that these states are allies, not protectorates. They, not we, should make the decisions about how they will be governed.