12

The International Politics of the Gulf

F. Gregory Gause, III

Overview 263
Introduction 263
Regime Security, Political Identity and Iraqi War Decisions 265
Regime Security, Regional Balancing and Saudi Arabian Alliance Decisions 271
American Policy in the Gulf 274
Conclusion 279

OVERVIEW

The international politics of the Gulf region are defined by the interplay of the local states and by the increasingly direct role of the United States in the region. The local states deal with each other not simply on the basis of balance of power concerns, though those concerns are certainly present. With Arab nationalist, Islamic and ethnic identities transcending Gulf borders, domestic security and stability concerns are as important in the foreign policies of the region's states toward each other and outside powers. The Gulf's strategic role as the source of two-thirds of the world's known petroleum reserves has given it enduring importance in global American strategy; its central role in the Islamic resurgence of past decades has increased Washington's interest in the area. From the Iranian Revolution in 1979 Washington has taken an increasingly direct military and political role there, culminating with the American invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Introduction

Two almost contemporaneous events in the early 1970's created the international politics of the Persian/Arabian Gulf region as we know them today: the British withdrawal of its protectorate over the Arab states of the lower Gulf, and the dramatic increase in oil world prices. This is not to say that there were no international relations in the Gulf before 1971. The Gulf had an important role in British imperial strategy from the outset of the nineteenth century, reinforced in the early twentieth century by the increasing importance of oil. The oil resources of the region made it important to both super-powers in the Cold War. The strong American relationship with both Saudi Arabia and monarchical Iran is a testament to that fact. Iran and Iraq, Iraq and Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states all had 'open files' of contentious issues among them, including but not limited to border disputes. However, the early 1970's marks a dramatic change in the structure of power in the area.

Before that time, the states of the region were limited in their abilities to project their power and influence beyond their borders, and checked by what remained of British power in the area should they try to do so. After that time, the three major regional states—Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia—all had vastly increased amounts of military and economic power. They could, and did, imagine themselves playing major roles in Gulf security issues. Their foreign policies became much more ambitious. At the same time, the restraint of great power presence in the area was removed, at least temporarily. Britain had left; the United States, mired in Vietnam and unwilling to take on new obligations, did not 'fill the vacuum'. The field was open for the regional states to take more forward and aggressive roles.

To some extent these new ambitions on the part of the regional powers can be understood in classical realist, balance of power terms. The desire for regional dominance is not unique to the Gulf. Balance of power motivations have proved as powerful for Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other local states as they have for states in other regions and other time periods. However, classical realism and balance of power politics do not provide a perfect template for understanding the Gulf regional system; they are necessary but not sufficient.

The security agenda in the Gulf is complicated by the fact that the local states were, at the same time that they were competing with each other for power and influence regionally, also confronting difficult domestic issues of state building. The social dislocations brought on by great oil wealth brought down the Shah's regime in Iran. Centrifugal forces threatened the integrity of the Iraqi state. The Gulf monarchies were buffeted by challenges to their domestic stability. The importance of transnational identities in the Gulf states exacerbated the sense of threat that rulers faced. Ba'thist Iraq's Arab nationalism was deployed at various times to encourage opposition to rulers in Iran (in Khuzistan) and the Gulf monarchies. Revolutionary Shi'i Islam was an important threat to domestic stability in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia. Kurdish ties cut across borders, and were exploited by one regime to pressure another on various occasions.

So it is not simply the balancing of power, or the desire to extend one's power internationally that has driven calculations of war and alliance in the Gulf. Threats are not simply military; they are also political. The Shah and the ayatallahs governed the same country, but the Arab states have viewed the nature of the threat emanating from different Iranian regimes in very different ways, and those views have affected the way they have dealt with the different Iranian regimes. Whether the Gulf states viewed Iraq as a threat or a protector had more to do with their perceptions of Iraqi intentions toward their regimes than with estimates of Iraqi military power. Regime security—the ability of the ruling élites to stay in power domestically—was as important, if not more important, in determining foreign policy choices than more traditional state security concerns, though they have been present as well.

I hope to demonstrate these points by considering two sets of issues: 1) Iraqi war decisions, in 1980 and 1990, and also in 1975 (Algiers Agreement) when Iraq chose not to go to war, and 1991, when Iraq chose not to withdraw from Kuwait in the face of superior power and almost certain defeat; and 2) the alliance choices made by Saudi Arabia at various times since 1971 in regional politics.

The regional security picture is not complete, however, without consideration of a third issue, the changes in American policy toward the region. American interest in the Gulf has been a constant, because of the strategic importance of oil, but the tactics that the United States has pursued have changed significantly over time, as a result of changes within the American political system—the 'Vietnam syndrome' and its aftermath; changes in the Gulf itself, such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iraqi attack on Kuwait in 1990; and changes in the international distribution of economic and political power, such as the oil price revolution of the early 1970's and the end of the Cold War in 1991. These changes have brought the United States into a much more direct role in the security picture of the Gulf from the late 1980's, constraining the freedom of action that the local states had enjoyed and presenting them with new challenges to regime and state security. With the American occupation of Iraq after its successful war in March–April 2003 to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein, the United States has become not merely an international actor in the region, but a local actor. The effects of this new level of American involvement in Gulf politics both in Iraq and regionally remain, as of 2004, to be seen.

Regime Security, Political Identity and Iraqi War Decisions

In both 1980 and 1990 the regime of Saddam Hussein launched wars against foes who were, or seemed to be, considerably weaker than Iraq. It is tempting to conclude that the ambitious Iraqi president attacked a militarily weakened Iran and a practically defenseless Kuwait because he thought he would win. Undoubtedly, the prospect for victory was an important element in Saddam's war calculations. However, the sequence of events and evidence from Iraqi sources indicate that these war decisions were driven as much, if not more, by fears about the prospects for regime security within Iraq itself, fears that were based on a belief that outside actors could manipulate Iraqi domestic politics against the Ba'thist regime. In each case, also, Iraqi calculations about the prospects of victory were inflated by the belief that the invasion would be met with at least some support both in the target state and in the larger region. Transnational connections inspired both the fears and hopes that lay behind the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88 and the first Gulf War of 1990–91. (For a fuller account of this argument, see Gause 2002.)

The Iran–Iraq War

The Iranian Revolution is the starting point for understanding the Iraqi war decision of 1980. The Shah's Iran and Ba'thist Iraq were never on particularly good terms. There were border crises between the countries that raised the prospect of war in 1969 and 1975. The 1975 crisis led to the Algiers Agreement, signed by then Vice-President Saddam Hussein and the Shah at an OPEC meeting in the Algeria capital. Iraq agreed to accept the Iranian definition of their common border along the Shatt al-Arab river. In turn, Iran ceased supporting the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion that was raging in northern Iraq. While not close, relations between the two states after 1975 were not overtly hostile.

The weakening of Iran in conventional power terms, which began in late 1977 as the revolutionary movement gathered steam, did not immediately excite Iraqi ambitions. On the contrary, Baghdad expelled Ayatollah Khomeini from Iraq in October 1978 and engaged in security consultations with the Shah's government. When the monarchical regime fell in February 1979, Iraq's first reactions were mildly welcoming to the new regime. Relations soon deteriorated, however. In June 1979 Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the most politicized of the major Iraqi Shi'i religious leaders, was arrested on the eve of a scheduled trip to Teheran. Violent demonstrations ensued in Iraqi Shi'i areas. Several prominent Iranian ayatollahs, including Khomeini, condemned the Iraqi regime as 'despotic' and 'criminal,' warning Iraq's rulers of 'the wrath of God and the anger of the Muslim people' (Menashri 1990: 101). Border clashes in the Kurdish areas ensued. In July 1979 Mas'ud and 'Idris Barazani, the sons of Iraqi Kurdish leader Mustafa Barazani, crossed the border into Iran and received support from the revolutionary government (Hiro 1991: 35).

In the midst of these events, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq on 16 July 1979. An explanation that focused purely upon Saddam's ambitions would expect a militant change in Iraqi policy toward Iran from that time. That did not happen. On the contrary, the two governments sought in the short term to deescalate tensions. Border skirmishes subsided. This did not, however, lead to any lessening of political ferment among Iraq's Shi'i majority. In July 1979, while under house arrest, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr called for violent opposition to the regime. Shortly thereafter the major Iraqi Shi'i political groups announced the formation of the 'Islamic Liberation Movement,' ready to 'resort to all means' to bring down the Ba'thist regime. In October 1979 the organisation of the Iraqi 'ulama, which previously had been leery of overt political opposition, declared its support for the use of violence against the government. Al-Da'wa, the major Iraqi Shi'i party, formed a military wing by the end of the year (Wiley 1992: 54–5; Tripp 2000: 229). In May 1980 the Iraqi interior minister told an interviewer that, while there were fewer than 1,000 members of al-Da'wa, 'the number of misguided supporters and religious sympathizers is considerable' (Foreign Broadcast Information Service-MEA-80-097, 16 May 1980: E2).

In the midst of this rising tide of Shi'i opposition in late 1979, Iranian politics took a militant turn. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan resigned in November 1979, in the wake of the take-over of the American embassy in Teheran. Statements about the need to export the Iranian revolutionary model around the region became more frequent, and by 1980 there were explicit calls by Iranian government officials for the Iraqi people to overthrow the Ba'th regime (Menashri 1990: 157–8; Khadduri 1988: 82; Chubin and Tripp 1988: 34). On 1 April 1980 a member of one of the Shi'i opposition groups attempted to kill Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. During the funeral procession for some of those killed in that attempt, according to the Iraqi media, a bomb was thrown from a window of an 'Iranian school' in Baghdad as the procession went past (FBIS-MEA-80-068, 7 April 1980: E5–7). In retaliation the Iraqi government executed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his sister and began to expel tens of thousands of Iraqi Shi'a of Iranian origins from the country.

These events were the final straw for Saddam Hussein, and the spur for the Iraqi war decision. His rhetoric underwent an immediate change. He began to threaten Iran in the most obvious way. By late July 1980 Saddam was all but promising a war: 'We are not the kind of people to bow to Khomeini. He wagered to bend us and we wagered to bend him. We will see who will bend the other' (FBIS-MEA-80-144, 24 July 1980: E4–5). When news of Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr's execution reached Iran, in mid-April 1980, the Iranian reaction matched the hostility now being exhibited by Saddam. Ayatollah Khomeini reiterated his previous calls to the Iraqi people and the Iraqi army to overthrow the regime, accusing the Ba'th of launching a 'war against Islam' (Hiro 1991: 35). Border clashes resumed.

Sources that have reported on the timing of the Iraqi decision to go to war almost unanimously place the decision in the spring of 1980, after the events of April (Gause 2002: 68). The gap between the war decision and the actual initiation of conflict in September 1980 is attributable to two factors. The first is planning and organisation, which would take some months to achieve. The second is the effort by Iranian exiles in Iraq to organise a military coup to overthrow the Islamic regime in Tehran. That effort, termed the 'Nuzhih plot' for the airforce base from which it was launched, was fully supported by Iraq and planned on Iraqi territory. Begun on 9 July 1980, it was a spectacular and immediate failure (Gasiorowski 2002). The failure of the coup served as confirmation to the Baghdad leadership the durability of the Islamic revolutionary regime on its border.

The Iraqi war decision of 1980 is best explained by the change in Saddam Hussein's framing of the issue of how to deal with Iran. With the changes in Iran after

November 1979 and the more open calls for the export of the Islamic Revolution, domestic unrest in Iraq came to be seen as orchestrated by Tehran. Saddam's regime could only look forward to further Iranian efforts to foment revolution against it, if nothing changed in Tehran. Facing that prospect, Saddam chose the risky path of war. He certainly thought he and Iraq would gain by victory, but the elements that made victory likely had been in place for some time. What had changed was his belief that a continuation of the status quo would only bring him more domestic problems.

Iraq's attack on Iran was spectacularly unsuccessful, both in destabilising the revolutionary regime in Tehran and in securing Iraqi control of southwestern Iran. By the summer of 1982 Iranian counterattacks had driven Iraqi forces out of Iranian territory. The Khomeini regime was then faced with a decision: declare victory over Iraq and accept a ceasefire, or continue the war in Iraqi territory. Ayatollah Khomeini decided the issue with a call to continue the war until the downfall of the Ba'thist regime in Baghdad. Tehran hoped that an effort to spread the Islamic revolution would be met with support among Iraqi Shi'is. That support was not forthcoming in any substantial way. The war dragged on for six more years. During most of that time, Iran was on the offensive and made occasional, limited gains, but was unable to break the Iraqi forces. Iraq turned the tide in 1988, recapturing lost territory in southern Iraq and demoralising Iran with missile attacks on Tehran. From 1987 the United States navy became directly involved in the war, protecting oil tankers from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against Iranian attack. After an American naval vessel shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in July 1988, Iran accepted UN Security Council resolution 598, calling for a ceasefire. Khomeini liked this decision to 'drinking poison', but even he had become convinced that Iran could not win the war. Eight years of bloody war, with hundreds of thousands of casualties on each side, ended with the two sides basically in the same position as when the war began.

The Gulf War

Establishing with certainty when Saddam Hussein decided to attack Kuwait is a difficult task. There are indications from Iraqi sources themselves that the decision was made only a few months before the actual invasion. Other sources place the decision to invade slightly earlier in 1990 (Gause 2002: 53–4). No source that refers specifically to the timing of the decision places it earlier than the spring of 1990. The haste with which the decision was made was reflected indirectly in some of the (very mild) self-criticism exercised by Iraqi leaders after the invasion. At a meeting of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council and Ba'th party leadership on 24 January 1991 Taha Yasin Ramadan told his colleagues 'I am not saying that August 2, 1990 [the date of Iraq's attack on Kuwait] was the best day for the mother of battles. We had not studied the situation for a year, or even for months, preparing for the mother of battles. But it was the will of God that decided the date' (al-Bazzaz 1996: 200, quoting from minutes of the meeting). There is every indication that the decision to invade Kuwait was made relatively shortly before the invasion, under feelings of time pressure. What had happened in the period leading up to the decision to trigger it?

Saddam Hussein's regime made it clear, before and after its invasion of Kuwait, that it saw an international conspiracy against it, meant to weaken Iraq internationally and destabilise it domestically. Its economic problems were blamed on lower oil prices, which were in turn blamed on 'overproduction' by Kuwait and the UAE, clients of the United States. Small shifts in American policy (like limits on US credits for Iraqi purchases of US rice exports and Congressional resolutions condemning Iraq for human rights violations) and damaging revelations (like Iraq's use of the Atlanta branch of an Italian bank to launder arms purchase money) after the end of the Iran–Iraq war were read as evidence that the United States had adopted a hostile attitude toward Iraq. Media attention to the Iraqi nuclear programme, and subsequent British and American efforts to block the export of dual-use technology to Iraq, were seen as part of a concerted effort to build a case against Iraq as a prelude to more severe measures.

Lurking behind many of these efforts, in the Iraqi view, was Israel, seen as preparing for a strike on the Iraqi nuclear establishment similar to the one it conducted in 1981 (Freedman and Karsh 1993: Chapters 2–3; Heikal 1993: 158–231; Baram 1993). Wafiq al-Samara'i, then deputy director of Iraqi military intelligence, says that at the beginning of 1990 his office began receiving a wave of warnings from Saddam's office about Israeli plans to strike at Iraqi nuclear, chemical and biological weapons facilities (al-Samara'i 1997: 365). Sa'ad al-Bazzaz, editor at the time of a major Baghdad daily newspaper, reports that the Iraqi leadership fully expected an Israeli military attack sometime in August 1990 (al-Bazzaz 1993: 345).

Saddam himself bluntly described this 'conspiracy' to al-Samara'i in March 1990 (al-Samara'i 1997: 222–3): 'America is coordinating with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and Kuwait in a conspiracy against us. They are trying to reduce the price of oil to affect our military industries and our scientific research, to force us to reduce the size of our armed forces . . . You must expect from another direction an Israeli military airstrike, or more than one, to destroy some of our important targets as part of this conspiracy'.

There was also an internal aspect to the Iraqi regime's fears. In either late 1988 or early 1989 scores of officers, many decorated for heroism in the war with Iran, were arrested and executed on the charge of membership in a secret organisation working to bring down the government. Hundreds of high-ranking officers indirectly connected to the accused were forced to retire (Baram 1993: 8; al-Bazzaz 1996: 36–7, 89–90; al-Samara'i 1997: 184–5; Tripp 2000: 249–50). Iraqi ruling circles came to believe during 1989 that they had evidence that a number of foreign powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, were attempting to infiltrate Iraqi society to collect intelligence and pressure the government (al-Bazzaz 1993: 159–60, 210–13). Other sources report a failed coup attempt in September 1989 and the exposure of a coup attempt, coupled with a plan to assassinate Saddam, in January 1990 (Freedman and Karsh 1993: 29–30; al-Samara'i 1997: 185; Baram 1997: 5–6).

While Saddam Hussein increasingly saw his domestic political and economic situation in 1989 deteriorate, events in the larger world during that year reinforced his growing sense of crisis. The fall of the Soviet client states in Eastern European increased his fears about the future of his own regime (al-Bazzaz 1993: 392). Saddam's sense that international and regional forces were conspiring with his domestic opponents against him had reached the point that, in October 1989, Tariq Aziz raised this issue in his meeting with Secretary of State Baker in Washington (Baker 1995: 265).

By early 1990 Saddam Hussein was convinced that his regime was being targeted. This belief was reflected in the changes in his rhetoric and the tone of Iraqi foreign policy. In February 1990 Saddam launched an attack on the United States military presence in the Gulf at the founding summit of the Arab Cooperation Council and devoted much of the speech to criticism of Israel (Bengio 1992: 37–49). This was followed by Saddam's threat in April 1990 to 'burn half of Israel', if the Israelis attacked Iraq. The rhetorical temperature escalated from there. At the same time, Iraqi rhetoric toward Kuwait and the other Gulf states hardened, and in January 1990 Iraq first proposed that Kuwait 'loan' it $10 billion, as well as write off Iraqi debts incurred during the war with Iran (Heikal 1993: 209). At the Arab summit of May 1990 Saddam likened overproduction of OPEC quotas to an act of war against Iraq (Freedman and Karsh 1993: 46–8).

This shift in Iraqi foreign policy, the beginning of the process that led to the invasion of Kuwait, came when Saddam concluded that there were international efforts afoot to destabilise him domestically. (Comments by Saddam himself and one of his chief aides at a meeting of the Iraqi leadership during the war confirm this analysis. See al-Bazzaz 1996: 198–99, 227–28.) It culminated with the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. Saddam's unwillingness to accept a negotiated solution to the Kuwait crisis, which would have required him to withdraw from Kuwait but spared his country and military the devastating attack of American and coalition forces, provides further evidence for the hypothesis that it was fear of domestic destabilisation that was the most important factor prompting his decision to invade.

The Iraqi leadership did not believe that withdrawal from Kuwait would end what it saw as the international conspiracy against it. On the eve of the ground war, after enduring a month of air attacks, Saddam told Soviet envoy Yevgeny Primakov, 'If America decided on war it will go to war whether I withdraw from Kuwait or not. They were conspiring against us. They are targeting the leadership for assassination. What have the Iraqis lost? They might yet gain!' (al-Bazzaz 1993: 399). After the war, Tariq Aziz was asked on the PBS documentary *The Gulf War* why Iraq did not withdraw when defeat seemed inevitable. He replied: 'Iraq was designated by George Bush for destruction, with or without Kuwait. Inside Kuwait or outside Kuwait. Before the 2nd of August or after the 2nd of August' (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/aziz/2.html).

The contrast with Iraqi acceptance of the Algiers Agreement in 1975 is instructive. Then, Saddam Hussein (who personally signed the agreement and continued to defend that decision, even after he himself had abrogated it at the outset of the Iran-Iraq War) believed that retreat internationally would strengthen the regime's domestic position. Saddam's belief that withdrawal from Kuwait in 1991 would not end the pressures on his domestic position emanating from abroad explains the different outcome in 1991.

The Gulf War ended with Iraq's defeat on the battlefield, its humiliating withdrawal from Kuwait and American dominance of the Gulf. However, Saddam Hussein for over a decade claimed victory in what Iraq termed the 'mother of battles' because his regime remained in power after the war.

Regime Security, Regional Balancing and Saudi Arabian Alliance Decisions

The importance of domestic regime security concerns in the foreign policies of Gulf states is highlighted by the alliance choices of Saudi Arabia during the different Gulf wars. Saudi maneuvering between Iraq and Iran during the 1980's was dictated as much by the ideological threat posed by the Iranian Islamic revolution as by simple balance of power concerns. The different Saudi reactions during the first and second Gulf Wars reflects the level of threat—both military and ideological—posed by Saddam Hussein's regime to the Saudi leadership, and by the different public opinion reactions in Saudi Arabia to American military moves against Iraq. While the Saudis acted in both cases within the broad confines of their long-standing security relationship with the United States, in the first they cooperated enthusiastically and publicly with the American military. In the second their cooperation was much less extensive and largely hidden from their population.

Saudi Arabia and the Iran–Iraq War

The Iranian Revolution changed the strategic picture dramatically for the Saudis. The new Islamic Republican government presented an open challenge to the legitimacy and stability of the Saudi regime, both as an example of Islamic revolution and as a promoter of discontent within Saudi Arabia and the other monarchical states of the Gulf. Driving home the threat posed by the new revolutionary regime, a wave of unrest, concentrated mostly in Shi'i communities, swept Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia from 1978 through 1980 (Kostiner 1987: 179; Ramazani 1986: 39–40). While the intensity of Iranian pressure on Saudi Arabia declined during the 1980's, the revolutionaries in Tehran continued to challenge the al Saud's Islamic credentials. Central to this challenge was Iranian behaviour during the annual pilgrimmage to Mecca. Iranian pilgrims held political demonstrations, expressly forbidden by the Saudi authorities, during the 1982 and 1983 pilgrimages. In 1987 Saudi security forces clashed with Iranian pilgrims, resulting in over 400 deaths. In contrast, during the 1980's Saddam Hussein's Iraq assiduously courted the Saudis, emphasising their common interest in checking the Iranian threat.

The beginning of the Iran–Iraq War presented the Saudis with a serious dilemma. They were concerned about the ultimate intentions of Saddam Hussein, if he emerged victorious against Iran. However, forced to choose between the two combatants, Saudi Arabia aligned with Iraq. Immediately upon the beginning of hostilities, Saudi Arabia permitted Iraqi planes to use Saudi bases (to hide them from Iranian counter-attack) and Saudi ports were opened for the trans-shipment of goods to Iraq (Safran 1986: 369). Contemporary sources report substantial Saudi financial aid to Iraq in 1980 and 1981 (Nonneman 1986: 96–7). Once Iranian forces entered Iraqi territory in 1982, Saudi support became more substantial. Billions of dollars of Saudi financial support helped Iraq fund the war. That support included direct aid, loans, military equipment and the sale of oil from the Saudi-Kuwaiti neutral zone with profits going to Iraq, theoretically as a 'loan' (King Fahd listed Saudi support for Iraq in a speech during the first Gulf war, *al-Sharq al-Awsat,* 17 January 1991: 4). After Syria cut the Iraqi pipeline to the Mediterranean in 1982, the Saudis permitted Iraq to build an oil pipeline into the Kingdom, connecting to an existing Saudi line from the Gulf to the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia also publicly supported Iraq in various diplomatic fora. During the Iran–Iraq War, Saudi Arabia was squarely in Iraq's camp.

The Saudis were not immune to exploiting the opportunities that the Iran–Iraq War presented. With Iran and Iraq consumed by their war, and the smaller states exposed to the myriad threats that war presented, the Saudis were able to organise in 1981 the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Council brought together the smaller monarchies (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman) under Saudi leadership.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf War

With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Saudi threat perception changed dramatically. Iraq was now an immediate military threat, moving troops up to the border of the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. It was also an immediate ideological/domestic threat to the Saudi regime. Iraq had overthrown a fellow monarchy. Shortly after the invasion, Iraq openly called, on both Islamic and Arab nationalist bases, for citizens in Saudi Arabia to revolt against their government. One Iraqi source reported that Saddam was confident that this propaganda barrage would destabilise the Saudi domestic scene so thoroughly that Riyadh would have no choice but to reverse its course and accept the new realities (al-Bazzaz 1996: 112).

The dire threat posed by Iraq, on both balance of power and domestic security levels, led the Saudis to overcome their hesitations about an open military alliance with the United States. In the past, Riyadh preferred to keep the American military 'over the horizon', worried that too public an embrace of the United States could lead to a domestic and regional public opinion backlash against the Al Saud regime. The Saudis chose to run the risk of alienating their own public, and welcomed hundreds of thousands of American forces into the kingdom.

With the success of the American campaign to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait, a new period in American–Saudi relations began. Riyadh was much more willing than in the past to cooperate openly with the American military, allowing it to use Saudi bases throughout the 1990's and into the 2000's to patrol the 'no-fly' zone in southern Iraq. This seemingly permanent American military presence excited domestic political opposition. It was one of the prime complaints leveled by Osama bin Laden against the Saudi rulers in his campaign against them. American facilities were attacked in Saudi Arabia in November 1995 in Riyadh and June 1996 in the Eastern Province. The former attack killed five Americans; the latter killed nineteenth and wounded hundreds.

As the Saudis continued to see Saddam Hussein as a major threat after the first Gulf War, their relations with Iran slowly began to improve. This trend was facilitated by changes in Iran itself. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 dissipated some of the fervor to 'export' the revolution, reducing at least one element of the threat the Saudis perceived from Iran. The collapse of oil prices in the mid-1990's brought Riyadh and Tehran closer together, as they cooperated within OPEC and with major non-OPEC producers to push prices up. Riyadh still looked upon Tehran with suspicion, both as an ideological competitor in the Muslim world and as a major regional power. Tehran was equally mistrustful of Saudi–American relations, which it saw in the context of Washington's anti-Iranian policy. However, the hard edge of ideological hostility that characterised relations in the 1980's had been replaced by more normal and businesslike ties.

Saudi Arabia and the Iraq War

Riyadh was much less willing to cooperate with the United States in its attack on Iraq in 2003 than it was in 1990–91. The Saudis officially opposed the American war. American ground troops and air forces were not permitted to use Saudi bases, with some exceptions that the Saudi government kept secret from its own population. The Saudi hesitancy to be publicly linked to this US attack on Iraq stemmed from two factors: 1) Saddam Hussein was not nearly the threat to the Saudi rulers that he was in 1990; and 2) Saudi public opinion had taken a dramatic anti-American turn. Publicly backing the United States ran the risk of fomenting a domestic backlash against the ruling regime. However, the Saudi rulers also did not want to alienate their American allies, whom they continued to see as their long-term security guarantors. The Saudis therefore cooperated with Washington militarily when such cooperation could be kept relatively quiet, and removed from the glare of publicity.

Saudi public opinion, by the beginning of 2003, was extremely anti-American. The upsurge in Israeli–Palestinian violence in the second *intifada,* which began in the autumn of 2000, was one factor increasing the level of anti-Americanism in the kingdom. The American reaction to the attacks of 11 September 2001 was another.

The debate in the United States over Saudi complicity in the attack was seen by many in Saudi Arabia as an attack on their country and their religion. The Saudi response, on both the governmental and popular levels, in the immediate aftermath was defensive and hostile to the United States. The American attack on the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan was depicted by many in Saudi as a super-power attack on a defenseless civilian population. A Gallup poll, conducted in late January–early February 2002, reported that 64 per cent of Saudi respondents viewed the US either very unfavourably or most unfavourably. Majorities in the poll associated America with the adjectives 'conceited, ruthless and arrogant'. Fewer than 10 per cent saw the US as either friendly or trustworthy (Burkholder 2002). Even though the Saudi government had begun, by the spring of 2002, to signal its public that it sought to preserve the Saudi–American relationship, anti-Americanism still ran high. A Zogby International poll conducted in February–March 2003 found that 95 per cent of the Saudis polled had either a very unfavourable or a somewhat unfavourable attitude toward the United States (Zogby International 2003).

In the face of this considerable public opinion rejection of American policy in the region, and without the perception of an immediate threat from Saddam Hussein, the Saudi leadership made every effort to separate itself publicly from American policy toward Iraq. However, the importance of the Saudi–American security relationship was such that Riyadh sought to cooperate with Washington where that cooperation could be kept out of their public's eye. The Saudis increased their oil production in the lead-up to the war, to try to prevent price spikes in world oil market. They permitted the United States to coordinate air attacks on Iraq from the command and control center at Prince Sultan Airbase south of Riyadh. They allowed American special forces access to an isolated Saudi bases in the northwest corner of the country, near the Iraqi border (*Financial Times*, 9 March 2003; *New York Times*, 18 March 2003).

The Saudis walked a tightrope in the second Gulf War, trying to do enough to keep Washington happy but not so much as to alienate their own public. It is a tightrope they had walked successfully before. The interesting point about their behaviour in this episode was not their cooperation with Washington, which could be expected both from their long-standing ties with the US and their hostility to Saddam Hussein. Rather, it was the way that Saudi public opinion put serious limits on the extent of that cooperation. Saudi anti-Americanism in this episode was based, at least in part, on transnational Arab and Muslim ideological solidarity with Palestinians and Iraqis.

American Policy in the Gulf

For the United States, the strategic significance of the Gulf region has been a constant since the Second World War because of its oil resources. During the period between the end of the Second World War and 1971, the United States developed close political, economic and military relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, to safeguard its interests and check the possibilities of Soviet moves in the area. Since the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, American policy in the region has gone through a number of stages, reflecting changes in the United States itself, in the Gulf, and in the world economic and strategic picture. Those stages have seen progressively greater American military involvement in the area, culminating in the second Gulf War of 2003.

The 1970's: oil revolution and the twin pillar policy

The end of British military responsibilities in the smaller Gulf states in 1971 could have been an opening for the United States to take on the British mantle directly, as it had in many other parts of the region since the Second World War. However, the British withdrawal occurred at the height of the American involvement in Vietnam, and there was no public or Congressional support for new foreign military obligations. Consistent with the 'Nixon Doctrine' of supporting friendly regional powers, Washington sought to safeguard its interests in the Gulf by supporting the military build-up of its two local allies, Iran and Saudi Arabia (Gause 1985: 258–66). The Soviet Union responded by strengthening its relations with Iraq, signing a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Baghdad in 1972, providing a Cold War justification for continued American military support for the 'twin pillars' of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The oil revolution of the early 1970's, culminating in the Saudi-led embargo by many Arab states of the sale of oil to the United States in 1973–74 (in reaction to American support for Israel in the 1973 Arab–Israeli War), could have been seen as a direct challenge to America's 'twin pillar' policy in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia led the embargo against the US. Iran took advantage of the situation to push oil prices to their highest levels in history. By the time the dust settled, oil prices had increased from around $3.00 per barrel to over $12.00 per barrel, sending the US and much of the rest of the world into a recession that lasted through the decade. Paradoxically, the oil revolution strengthened the 'twin pillar' policy. The importance of the Gulf region for American foreign policy increased dramatically, but Washington was unable to take a direct military role there. With vast new oil revenues, Iran and Saudi Arabia were able to drastically increase their military spending, with most of their purchases coming from the United States. The 1970's saw an intensification of military, economic and political relations between the United States and its Gulf partners (Safran 1986: Chapter 12; Bill 1988: Chapter 6).

The Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War

America's 'twin pillar' policy in the Gulf came crashing down in 1979, as the Islamic revolution swept the Shah of Iran from power. The new Islamic Republic of Iran was intensely hostile toward the United States, a hostility both signified and magnified by what in the US came to be known as the 'Iranian hostage crisis'.

From November 1979 to January 1981 Iranian revolutionaries, with the support of Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, detained American diplomatic personnel in Iran. President Jimmy Carter attempted to free the hostages through a military raid in April 1980, which failed spectacularly, pointing up the weakness of the US military position in the area. Almost contemporaneously with the hostage crisis, the Soviet Union in December 1979 invaded Afghanistan in order to prop up a failing Communist regime there. The Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent Iraqi attack on Iran in September 1980 all further destabilised the world oil market, with oil prices increasing to over $30 per barrel in 1980–81.

The American reaction to this set of strategic challenges was to reconfirm its commitment to its remaining Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia, and to begin a reconfiguration of American military power to focus more resources on the Gulf region. In the State of the Union address in January 1980, President Carter declared that the United States would use all of the military means at its disposal to confront any 'hostile power' trying to dominate the Gulf. The Reagan Administration, coming to power in January 1981, vastly increased the US military budget, fleshing out operationally the ambitious plans laid out at the end of the Carter Administration for a 'Central Command' devoted to the Gulf region. Over intense Congressional objections, it sold Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia in 1981, re-establishing what had by the late 1970's become a slightly frayed US-Saudi security relationship. The Reagan Administration also continued efforts begun by Carter to negotiate basing rights in the region, most notably with Oman. Other Gulf states were more reluctant in the early 1980's to open their territory to the American military (Kupchan 1987: Chapters 4–6).

While the United States increased its regional military capabilities in the early and mid-1980's, it did not find it necessary to use them, even though war raged between Iraq and Iran. As damaging as the Iran–Iraq War was to the combatants, it had surprisingly few spillover effects in the region as a whole, at least until its last years. Though the fortunes of war ebbed and flowed, neither side achieved a military breakthrough that might have drastically altered the regional power situation. Moreover, the price of oil, after spiking to over $40 per barrel at the beginning of the war, began to decline markedly from 1982. In 1986, prices briefly fell below $10 per barrel, less in real terms than they were before the 1973 oil price revolution. With the war generally stalemated and oil prices declining, the United States saw no need for direct military intervention in the region.

From 1982, when Iraqi forces withdrew from Iran and the Iranians took the fight across the border into Iraq, Washington began to support Iraq directly. The US shared intelligence with Baghdad, encouraged (or did not discourage) allies from supplying Iraq with weapons, sold Iraq 'dual use' technologies like helicopters and extended economic credits for the Iraqi purchase of American agricultural goods (Jentleson 1994: Chapter 1). In 1985–86 the Reagan Administration also conducted secret diplomacy with Iran in what became known as the 'Iran-contra scandal'. The US arranged for Israeli arms to be sold to Iran, in an effort to secure the release of American hostages from Lebanon and channel funding to the American-supported Nicaraguan opposition forces, the 'contras'. Some in the Administration hoped that this opening would lead to a renewal of a strategic partnership with Iran, but public revelation of these dealings led both sides to repudiate the initiative.

Seeking to pressure the Gulf monarchies to cut their support for Iraq, Iran in 1986 began to attack oil tankers shipping Kuwaiti, and occasionally Saudi, oil through the Gulf (Iraq had been striking at Iranian tankers for some time). Kuwait requested both the United States and the Soviet Union to protect their ships. The combination of Washington's interest in balancing the Soviets and desire to restore its *bona fides* with the Arab states after the revelation of the 'Iran-contra scandal' in November 1986 brought the American navy into the Gulf in early 1987, where it engaged with Iranian forces on numerous occasions. In July 1988 an American ship shot down an Iranian civilian airliner over the Gulf, mistaking it for an Iranian air force jet. Days later, Iran accepted UN Security Council Resolution 598, calling for a ceasefire in the Iran–Iraq War.

The Gulf War and the 1990's

The American naval deployment at the end of the Iran–Iraq War represented a new level of military cooperation between the Gulf monarchies and the US. Kuwait opened up its ports to American naval vessels. Saudi Arabia, which had preferred that the US military be 'over the horizon' rather than in the Gulf itself, granted American forces new levels of access to Saudi facilities. This was the beginning of what would become an open security alliance with the United States in the wake of the Iraqi attack on Kuwait in August 1990.

The end of the Cold War had removed the global strategic threat that had, in part, driven American policy toward the Gulf over the previous decades. However, the first Gulf War demonstrated to Washington that local actors could challenge America's oil interests and America's allies in the region as well. With Saddam Hussein still in power in Iraq after the war, and the Islamic Republic of Iran still at odds with the United States, Washington looked to the Gulf monarchies to provide bases for the American forces which took up a long-term station in the region. The monarchies, still traumatised by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and wary of Iranian intentions, welcomed the security cover that the American forces provided. American military bases (though they were not officially called bases) were established in Kuwait and Qatar. The command of America's Gulf naval force, renamed the Fifth Fleet, moved onshore in Bahrain. Oman and the UAE provided regular access to their facilities for American forces. An American air wing operated out of Saudi airbases to patrol southern Iraq. There were some negative public reactions to this new level of American military presence, most notably the June 1996 bombing of an apartment complex in eastern Saudi Arabia called Khobar Towers housing American air force personnel. However, these events did not alter the course of American policy.

That policy was based on the containment of both Saddam's Iraq and Islamic Iran—what the Clinton Administration called 'dual containment.' Containment of Iraq was legitimated by UN Security Council resolutions that maintained severe economic and military sanctions on the country as long as Saddam's regime failed to comply fully with the requirement that it disarm. While the sanctions were altered at times during the 1990's to try to alleviate the sufferings it imposed on the Iraqi population, their cumulative effect was to impoverish the country while not destabilising Saddam's regime (Graham-Brown 1999). American containment of Iran was unilateral, and largely ignored by the rest of the world.

11 September 2001 and the Iraq War

The attacks of 11 September 2001 by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida group on New York and Washington marked an important turning point in American policy in the Gulf. There was a sense as the new Bush Administration came to power in January 2001 that US Gulf policy had reached an impasse. Sanctions on Iraq were losing international support and showed no prospect of unseating Saddam Hussein's regime. Increasing anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia made the American military deployment there increasingly difficult. Neither containment nor inducements seemed to change the hostile status-quo of Iranian–American relations. September 11 drove American policy in new directions toward all three countries.

The most important change was toward Iraq. The new US 'war on terrorism' was not limited to al-Qaida and its direct state supporter, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In his State of the Union address in January 2002, President Bush defined the terrorist threat to include unfriendly states seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction, because they could pass those weapons on to terrorist groups seeking to use them against the United States. Iraq was named by the president as the centre of this new 'axis of evil' threatening American security. The Administration succeeded in garnering American public and Congressional approval for war, but failed to receive the kind of UN mandate that legitimated the first Gulf War. With limited international support, the US launched a war against Iraq in March 2003. In a matter of weeks Saddam's regime crumbled and American forces occupied the country.

The contention that Iraq had large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, readily deployable and able to be passed on to terrorists—the centrepiece of the Bush Administration's public case for war—proved to be unfounded. The causes of this intelligence failure, and the extent to which the Bush Administration knowingly exaggerated this threat, will be the subject of considerable investigation and debate. However, it is clear that the WMD issue was not the only factor in the American war decision. The belief that an American-reconstructed Iraqi polity could be a beacon of moderation and pro-Western democracy in the region, exerting pressure for reform on neighbouring states that would then reduce the chances of terrorist groups developing in those states, was strongly held by some in the Administration. The strategic benefits of increased American power in the centre of world oil production, and in an area directly connected to Arab-Israeli issues, also had to be part of the decision calculus. The reconstruction of the Iraqi political system, a task far from complete as 2004 began, will determine whether the Bush Administration's ambitious gamble in Iraq will yield the results it hoped.

The September 11 attacks also altered the American–Saudi relationship. The mastermind of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, and fifteen of the nineteen perpetrators were from Saudi Arabia, focusing American public anger against the kingdom in a way unprecedented since the 1973–74 oil embargo. Many in America saw Saudi Arabia as, at best, an ambivalent ally in the 'war on terrorism', and, at worst, through its funding of Islamic groups and causes around the world, a supporter of terrorism. Anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia, growing in the 1990's for reasons discussed above, increased even further in reaction to what was seen by many Saudis as an American effort to blame them specifically, and Islam in general, for the attacks (Gause 2002). While both the Saudi and American governments stressed that the bilateral relationship remained sound, it quickly became clear that the close military cooperation developed after the first Gulf War could not be sustained. At the end of the second Gulf War, the American combat personnel who had been stationed in Saudi Arabia since 1991 were withdrawn. The two governments continued to cooperate on oil and regional political issues, but the American strategic presence in the region came to be concentrated in the smaller Gulf states and in Iraq. Tensions over 'war on terrorism' issues looked to become an enduring part of the Saudi–American relationship.

September 11 also brought to an end the tentative steps, at the end of the Clinton Administration, to re-engage with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Paradoxically, the 'war on terrorism' pitted the US against two Iranian adversaries: the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Iran remained neutral in both wars, a stance which helped the United States. However, Iran fell into the category of states targeted in the expansive definition the Bush Administration gave to the 'war on terrorism', in that it was suspected of developing nuclear weapons and had links to terrorist groups identified by the US as terrorist. It was named by President Bush in his January 2002 State of the Union address as one of the members of the 'axis of evil'. With Washington concentrating on Iraq throughout 2002 and the first half of 2003, Iran policy was put on hold. There were even discussions between American and Iranian representatives on Afghan and Iraqi issues. After the second Gulf War, however, indications emerged of a new American policy of pressure on Iran. Confrontation rather than rapprochement seemed more likely.

Conclusion

During the 1970's and the 1980's, up to the first Gulf War, the driving force behind international political events in the Gulf was the regional states themselves: the oil embargo of 1973–74, the Iranian Revolution, the Iraqi war decisions of 1980 and

1990. The United States played an important, but largely reactive, role in that period. It was constrained by its own domestic politics, with the Vietnam legacy preventing it from playing a more direct military role in the Gulf. It was constrained by the superpower competition of the Cold War, where American actions could be met by Soviet reactions. The first sections of this chapter thus dealt with the motivations behind regional state behaviour—Iraqi war decisions and Saudi alliance decisions—because it was the regional states that set the agenda. That agenda was greatly influenced by the importance of transnational Arab, Muslim and ethnic (Kurdish) identities in the region. Regime security concerns, the desire to stay in power and thwart domestic opponents, drove regional states' foreign policy behaviour as much as, if not more than, classic balance of power considerations.

The initiative in Gulf international politics passes from the regional states to the United States during the Gulf War of 1990–91. The constraints of domestic public opinion and Cold War competition on American freedom of action were removed, and the Gulf monarchies were willing to associate themselves with the US military in an unprecedented way during the 1990s. 11 September 2001 marks a further escalation of American regional involvement, as the 'war on terrorism' becomes both the motive and the justification for the United States to shed the last international constraint on its behaviour in the Gulf—the need for international legitimation provided by the United Nations. With the United States occupying Iraq, consolidating its protectorate status in the smaller Gulf monarchies, pushing Saudi Arabia to cooperate more actively in the 'war on terrorism' and pressuring Iran for major changes in its foreign policy, the driving force in Gulf politics is now Washington. How successful this ambitious American effort to remake the politics of the region will be is an open question. It was a domestic political event, the Iranian Revolution, which scuttled an earlier American security policy in the Gulf. Whether domestic political trends in Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia will work for or against American ambitions in the future remains to be seen.

Further Reading

AL-RASHEED, M., *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). A re-interpretation of the country's history that emphasises power and domination.

KEDDIE, N. R., *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). The best single volume history of modern Iran.

LIPPMAN, T. W., *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2004). A balanced approach to a complicated relationship.

MARR, P., *The Modern History of Iraq*, 2nd edn. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2004). A comprehensive and readable one volume history.

PURDUM, T. S. and the Staff of the *New York Times*, *A Time of Our Choosing: America's War in Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt/Times Books, 2003). The politics in Washington and the battles in Iraq, according to the *New York Times* correspondents.

SIFRY, M. L. and CERF, C. (eds.), *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2003). A useful collection of various points of view and background material on the war.