The GCC States and the Security Challenges of the Twenty-First Century

Joseph Kostiner
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# THE GCC STATES AND THE SECURITY CHALLENGES OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: THREATS AND DEFENSE PERCEPTIONS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEFORE 2003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: THE US OCCUPATION OF IRAQ AND THE TERRORIST CHALLENGE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bin Ladin’s Militant Opposition to the Saudi State</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism and Iraq</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Threat and the Gulf Response</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: THE GRADUAL RISE OF THE IRANIAN THREAT</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shift of attention from Iraq to Iran</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Iran’s Growing Regional Aspirations</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCC Responses to Iran’s Nuclear Development</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronting Iranian Influence in the Middle East</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The GCC States and the Security Challenges of the Twenty-First Century

Joseph Kostiner *

INTRODUCTION

The US invasion of Iraq in April 2003 generated a new set of threats and challenges for the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These threats included the possibility of Sunni- and Shi'i-instigated terrorism spreading to the GCC states from Iraq, and, as in Iraq, the outbreak of sectarian fighting in these states. Iranian ambitions to achieve regional hegemony and develop nuclear capabilities also posed a threat to the GCC states. Finally, within the GCC itself, there was the constant risk of failure to devise appropriate strategies to confront these threats and the possibility that GCC unity would fracture over disagreements regarding appropriate responses and immediate interests. This study analyzes how the GCC states attempted to cope with the US occupation of Iraq and the emerging challenges to GCC security and legitimacy.

The discussion demonstrates that the challenges faced by GCC states before 2003 were substantially different from those of the post-2003 phase; yet, GCC leaders remained preoccupied with the pre-2003 methods of response and failed to adopt a suitable strategy for dealing with new threats. The 1990s were characterized by a Gulf region free from serious security threats and conflicts, and this had allowed GCC states to grow lax in their regional security and diplomatic coordination. Except for Saddam’s short-lived occupation of Kuwait in 1990-1991, GCC states did not find themselves effectively threatened by either Iraq or Iran, and therefore were not forced to

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devise strategies to combat immediate threats. The US military presence in Iraq starting in 2003 and the perceived ties between American aggression and GCC-US cooperation marked the beginning of a period of increased threats to the GCC, which the individual states, and the GCC as a whole, were unprepared to address.

The impact of the US occupation of Iraq and the ambitions of Iran, which crystallized after the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005, were crucial in shaping a new regional system. These developments had three effects. First, the GCC states had gotten used to regarding Saddam’s Iraq as the military aggressor, but its power had been curbed by the US military and by crippling UN sanctions. GCC leaders were not used to viewing post-Saddam Iraq as a new center of unrest, with strong Sunni-Shi'i sectarian strife that had the potential to impact the GCC states themselves. Likewise, GCC leaders were unaccustomed to viewing Iran as a would-be nuclear power with Middle Eastern hegemonic ambitions and an operational axis of allies including regional guerilla organizations.

Second, the regional implications of Iran’s ascendancy forced the GCC states to consider more than just their own interests: they also had to consider the impact of Iranian policies in other Middle Eastern arenas. Some problematic policies included: Iran’s development of nuclear capabilities, its ambitions for regional dominance, and its alliances with terrorist organizations, such as Lebanese Hizballah and Palestinian Hamas, all aimed at destabilizing Arab regimes as well as breaking the relative lull in the Arab-Israeli conflict. These challenges concerned the GCC states in light of their physical proximity to Iran as well as their participation in the greater Middle Eastern theater, where Iran’s growing reach could challenge GCC policies.

Third, the US had had a balanced policy for the region, evidenced by the “dual containment” principle and a relatively limited military deployment in the Gulf. However, this changed in 2003, when the US occupied Iraq and became a major actor in regional affairs. This shattered the balance of power in the region, weakening Iran’s regional rivals and enabling its rise to power.
Throughout the period under discussion, the GCC states also had to cope with the disparate positions and images of US policies and presence in the region. The US role as the GCC’s major defender was often overshadowed by Washington’s tarnished image as the occupier of Iraq and the leading opponent of Iran, which generated criticism in the GCC states. Consequently, GCC leaders were often forced to devise contradictory policies to adjust to these conditions.

In response to these rising challenges, GCC leaders had to reevaluate their pre-2003 defense policies. These had mainly been diplomatic, tension-lowering gestures toward surrounding states and were not devised to cope with the new regional circumstances.

This paper will examine GCC threat perceptions and responses. First, the decade of the 1990s will be examined to understand the changes in security threats to the GCC states at the turn of the century. Next, the consequences of US policies in Iraq and Iran, as well as GCC responses to regional issues such as terrorism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and regional nuclearization will be addressed in an attempt to determine how the GCC perceived threats to its security in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and how they chose to respond.
CHAPTER 1

THREATS AND DEFENSE PERCEPTIONS BEFORE 2003

Before 2003, Iraq was a constant military threat for the GCC states, presenting the possibility of either a full military invasion or limited incursion to capture economically or strategically important sites. Iraq had not withdrawn its claim to Kuwait and continued its hostility toward Saudi Arabia and Kuwait through its media and official declarations, stating a desire for revenge on account of their initiation of the anti-Iraq coalition in 1990-1991. However, most of Iraq’s army had been destroyed in the war and its ability to harm the GCC states was effectively checked by the UN Security Council resolutions, followed by occasional air and missile raids launched by US and British forces against Iraqi targets. Thus the prospect of an actual attack on the GCC states was substantially reduced after 1991.1

While Iran did not constitute a threat as imminent as Iraq, it demonstrated an appetite for territorial dominance and a readiness to exercise military force. In April 1992, Iranian forces expelled UAE troops from the Island of Abu Musa in the Gulf. Having taken control of the Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands in 1971, Iran became the dominant power at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, the passageway from the Persian Gulf into the Indian Ocean. Moreover, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) with both unconventional and ballistic capabilities were presumably still held by Iraq despite constant UN inspections and also developed by Iran during the period in question. However, since the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran had shown no interest in a new war or in actively threatening the GCC states. Iran preferred to develop good relations with the GCC in order to isolate Iraq, its regional rival.

Terrorism posed another challenge to the GCC. There were sabotage attacks in the Saudi Arabian city al-Khubar in June 1995 and near Riyadh in November 1996, killing tens of people, notably US soldiers stationed there. When the perpetrators were not found, unofficial reports attributed the attacks to either Shi’i or Bin Ladin-led initiatives.2 In Gulf leaders’ perceptions, Arab Gulf states were vulnerable to terrorism due to their close location to Iraq and Iran,
GCC STATES AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

their wealth, and their alliance with the US. The 1990s, however, witnessed considerably fewer terrorist attacks than the 1980s, as Saudi and Kuwaiti leaders managed to manipulate their Shi'i populations into political quiet.

Another looming threat was the erosion of Gulf leaders' domestic legitimacy through hostile propaganda campaigns, depicting Gulf regimes as too lax in their Islamic practices or too subservient to Western interests. For instance, Iran, an unfriendly regional power advocating Khomeini’s Shi'i Islam, or Bin Ladin, with his creed of anti-establishment Sunni Islam, could destabilize Gulf states by leading a negative media campaign, creating a regional coalition of anti-GCC states, or instigating terrorism or broad public opposition. However, after Muhammad Khatami was elected Iranian president in 1997, Tehran sought rapprochement with the GCC. Saddam’s Iraq, which sought to convince the Arab public that the Iraqi people were suffering under the yoke of UN sanctions, was at the time interested in mending fences with Kuwait. Thus, the threat of delegitimization by hostile entities was in decline by the end of the 1990s.

Terrorism and opposition were fuelled by broader socio-political developments in the Gulf. Economic conditions in the 1990s were characterized by declining oil income, as price per barrel sank from $41 in 1981 to less than $15 in the mid-1990s, and production declined 60 percent. Gulf governments found it difficult to meet the younger generation’s high socio-economic expectations and abandon their own patriarchal and nepotistic practices. Socio-political unrest therefore rose during the pre-2003 period, marked by the growth of Islamic fundamentalist movements. This wave of turmoil receded somewhat in the second half of the 1990s, but it was enough to constitute a continuous threat to all Gulf states. Since 1999, however, oil prices have risen once again, reaching a high of more than $150 per barrel in 2007 and parts of 2008. The financial windfall and various political reforms in the GCC states somewhat eased the social tension in the GCC.

A final security challenge was for Gulf states to overcome internal disputes that could otherwise lead to the splitting of the GCC and the formation of a hostile regional coalition. The hostility between Saudi
Arabia and Qatar over border issues in 1992 and between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over Saudi progressive rapprochement with Iran while the Iranian takeover of Abu Musa had not yet been resolved, almost paralyzed GCC meetings for several months in each case. Moreover, Qatar and the UAE responded by making diplomatic overtures towards Iraq, which naturally upset Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.\(^5\)

These problems complicated the modes of cooperation among the GCC, leading to the development of divergent threat perceptions. While Kuwait and Saudi Arabia regarded Saddam’s Iraq as the main potential aggressor, the UAE cast Iran in this role. These differences, however, were not overly divisive for the GCC states, first, because the security threats were not immediate, and second, because the GCC states managed to transcend their differences and maintain a cooperative partnership, based on the similar nature of their monarchical-tribal regimes.

Another Gulf security issue in the pre-2003 period concerned US and foreign influence in the region. Gulf states had learned to rely on a foreign power for their defense, a role historically performed by Britain. At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain had counteracted the Ottoman Empire’s attempts to assert its power in the Gulf and later Saudi Arabia and Iraq’s claims on Kuwait. The US had also acted as an important defender in the Gulf, notably in 1987-1988 when, threatened by violence from the Iran-Iraq War, it protected Gulf tankers under the “reflagging operation.”\(^6\) In light of the Arab states’ weak response to Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the GCC states came to regard US and other foreign forces as their saviors.

After the Iraq-Kuwait War (1990-1991), the Gulf states relied on the US. Their former trust in inter-Arab diplomacy as a defense mechanism evaporated in light of the failure of Arab mediation to stop the Iraqi invasion. In 1991-1992, the GCC officially accepted, but avoided implementing, two plans: one, to form a unified Gulf army, an idea suggested by Qabus, the sultan of Oman, and two, to combine the Gulf states’ armed force with large Egyptian and Syrian military contingencies, a plan known as the Damascus Declaration of
March 6, 1991, Kuwait went on to sign a military pact with the US in October 1992. It also signed pacts with all member states of the UN Security Council, which became the backbone of its future security. Other Gulf states initiated official or unofficial security arrangements with the US as well. Accordingly, several thousand US troops were stationed in various locations, ready to combat external threats. In times of belligerence, larger contingencies would join these pre-positioned forces.

However, certain disadvantages gradually became evident in the Gulf states’ absolute reliance on US forces against external, military threats. First, US troops were neither trained nor equipped to defend against threats stemming from social unrest or Islamic fundamentalist activities. Moreover, US forces were regarded by the radical Islamic opposition movements as the ultimate target for attacks. US military bases were subsequently moved to remote desert locations. In fact, Saudi authorities’ fear of fundamentalist-initiated riots and religious criticism against the government, which occurred even in the face of the Iraqi threat in 1990-1991, led them to avoid signing an official security pact with Washington. It also caused them to deflect media attention as much as possible from the actual US military presence on Saudi soil.

Furthermore, Gulf societies were critical of US containment of Iraq and Iran in May 1993. The “dual containment” policy sought a change of behavior in Iran’s foreign policy, namely the desistance from exporting terrorism and threatening Gulf states. Gulf leaders could have appreciated a US policy that established a regional balance between Iran and Iraq, but they failed to see the benefit in dual containment. In Iraq, continuous US and British air strikes and the activity of UN weapons inspectors searching for WMDs did not bring Saddam’s regime down, and his resilient image continued to radiate in the Gulf. Moreover, UN economic sanctions on Iraq were increasingly criticized by Arab states as a main cause of the suffering of the Iraqi population, a position which embarrassed Gulf leaders.

Gulf leaders perceived the election of Muhammad Khatami to the Iranian presidency as a turning point for Iranian moderation in the region and deemed the subsequent American response inappropriate.
Dual containment was perceived as inadequate: it entangled the Gulf states in what seemed to be US insistence to punish Saddam for not cooperating with UN inspectors, rather than ensuring Gulf states' security.\(^8\) Media articles in the Gulf stressed that "containment" should hinge less on crude power, as it had in the Cold War era, and suggested that the US try to achieve more regional reconciliation. Gulf societies called for the US to support an active dialogue between Washington and Tehran rather than force a wedge between the Gulf states and Iran. More critical voices accused the US of forging regional conspiracies to facilitate military intervention.\(^9\)

While the US remained the GCC's supreme defense guarantor, Gulf states tried to limit their reliance on the US military since its presence and security policies were counterproductive to other Gulf security concerns. In the face of the relatively small military threat posed against the GCC in the years 1991-2003, the use of US military force was quite limited, and GCC leaders grew accustomed to this arrangement.

To cope with other threats, Gulf states relied on cooperation with various Middle Eastern states. For example, cooperation with Tehran was supposed to appease Iran’s fundamentalist wrath in order to prevent Shi'i terrorism and the arousal of popular opposition movements at home. Good relations with Iran were also meant to garner Iranian support for the Gulf states’ position vis-à-vis Iraq. Gulf leaders did not expect Iran to oppose Iraq militarily or to defend the Gulf states. Rather, they sought Iranian rejection of any Iraqi attempts to form a military pact with Iran and political support for the GCC against Iraqi aggression. They were interested in recreating Iran's position during the Iraq-Kuwait War, when Iran helped prevent military assistance for Iraq and supported Kuwaiti sovereignty.\(^10\)

Since the early 1990s, Kuwait consistently offered friendly overtures to Iran, as Kuwait's leaders explained that Iran was a cooperative neighboring state with legitimate interests in the Gulf. After Khatami was elected president of Iran in April 1997, Saudi Arabia also initiated a rapprochement with Tehran, manifested by visits of leading figures to both states, which prompted the signing of new trade agreements between the two states.\(^11\) With the exception of the UAE,
which continued to harbor animosity towards Tehran over the Abu Musa affair, other Gulf states benefited from the new cooperation with Iran. Iran actually ceased supporting acts of terrorism against Gulf states, and Khatami’s policies were hailed by a number of intellectuals in the Gulf as a reflection of moderation.

This thaw in GCC-Iran relations had its shortcomings. Not only was the UAE a source of anti-Iranian sentiment among the Gulf states, but some of Iran’s own regional strategic goals were unacceptable to the GCC states. Tehran sought to remove US forces from the Gulf and protect the region with its own forces, which would allow Iranian dominance. Moreover, Tehran supported the Shi’i denomination, which differed from the Sunni nature of the GCC states. Iran also maintained a staunch, post-revolution resistance to any thaw in the Arab-Israeli conflict, while the GCC states expressed their readiness to endorse some form of Arab-Israeli peace process.¹²

Despite their efforts to befriend Iran, the Gulf states did not enter into any joint security arrangements, as Tehran advocated, and continued to rely on US defenses. Oman, which had reached what could be regarded as a security arrangement with Iran in April 1999, subsequently labored to explain that the document in question was not an official agreement. Its foreign minister went to the UAE in May 1999 to clear the air over Oman’s dealings with Iran.¹³ Iran’s armament, including WMDs and two Russian-built submarines, added to the Gulf states’ reluctance to rely on Iran. Thus, as with US defenses, reliance on Iran’s military could not provide a foolproof strategy for defense. However, Iran, under Khatami’s leadership, was seen as a restrained neighbor.

Gulf states relied on other means of defense as well, and diplomatic cooperation with Syria and Egypt was significant. Support by these two leading Arab states was instrumental in legitimizing their position and went a long way toward refuting Iraqi and Iranian media criticism of the Gulf. For example, in their policy towards Iran, GCC states wanted Syria and Egypt to side with them politically, as they had in 1990-1991, as a show of justification for their policies. At the same time, as previously mentioned, the Gulf states distrusted Egyptian and Syrian military capabilities.¹⁴
The Gulf states did not enter into a new GCC-centered security pact either; Bahrain’s proposal to that effect was rejected by member states in November 1999. However, GCC leaders’ bilateral meetings and collective forums served as a declaratory process to legitimize, debate, or reject new security initiative. The dispute between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the fall of 1998, due to Abu Dhabi’s disagreement with Riyadh’s improving relations with Tehran, further demonstrated that cooperation among GCC members was only a limited military means; however, it was a consistent aspect of Gulf diplomacy.

The practice of achieving security in the Gulf combined a mix of imperfect strategies. While each strategy could prove to be advantageous in one area, it could strike at other shortcomings in Gulf security. GCC leaders had to employ each security strategy for its benefits and simultaneously neutralize its possible repercussions. For instance, reliance on US military power was essential, but the leaders had to compensate for liabilities such as terrorist attacks directed at US forces and fierce media criticism in Iran, Iraq, and sometimes Syria, for the GCC’s overreliance on the “imperialist” power. The Gulf states sought to combat this criticism by building legitimacy through political and economic cooperation with Egypt, Syria, and Iran, but in so doing, had to avoid developing military reliance on these states. Thus, a rapprochement with Iran required immediate placation of the UAE and the US, and cooperation with Egypt and Syria required setting limits on their influence, so as to permit the US to remain the GCC’s main defender.

This multi-faceted system rested on insufficient coordination among the Gulf states. The tactics may have complimented each other, but they were often contradictory, without a clear, all-encompassing vision. Much was left to improvisation and bargaining without entering into any concrete arrangements. Despite this lack of coordination and institutionalization, the GCC states were content with the ad hoc informal security arrangements. Each GCC member was still able to develop its domestic strategies through its own diplomatic initiative, leaving certain security issues to be addressed by the US.
The GCC leaders’ satisfaction with these security arrangements resulted less so from their effective implementation, and more so from the relatively low level of aggression directed against the Gulf in the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century. For instance, the aggressive Iraqi activities against Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were checked by US forces and controlled by UN Security Council resolutions. Iran was restrained and attempted to display a friendly posture toward the GCC states, particularly during Khatami’s tenure. The terrorist threat was evident but sporadic and did not put the GCC regimes in existential danger. Moreover, the al-Qaida-initiated attacks of September 11, 2001 did not actually occur in the Gulf and had no immediate impact there. The security arrangements of the 1990s, which relied on restrained responses by the US and the GCC states themselves, in cooperation with the Arab states and Iran, were enough to meet the threats that preceded the US occupation of Iraq in April 2003. These arrangements, however, had to be subsequently modified.
CHAPTER 2

THE US OCCUPATION OF IRAQ AND THE TERRORIST CHALLENGE

The GCC states lacked a clear strategy for coping with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and had difficulty responding to the new situation. However, none of the Gulf states dared to oppose the US and many of them welcomed the demise of Saddam’s regime. The understanding among the Gulf states was that in the event of an American attack on Iraq, the Gulf states should side with the US. After all, the US had been their main defender against Saddam’s aggression. Moreover, they wanted to band with the victorious power.

Yet, the GCC was concerned that the invasion may complicate the delicate regional balance and lead to a deterioration in Iraq. In a March 2003 interview, UAE Chief of Staff General Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktum stressed that an American invasion could accentuate internal political fallouts in Iraq, leading to sectarian war and to outside intervention. He further warned of the development of popular resistance to American forces should American units be deemed as occupiers. He also stressed that Iraq could be weakened by the invasion, causing regional consequences.

In practice, the US was aided by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis permitted the US to station forces at the Daharan air base as a main headquarters from which to stage the invasion. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who had been the ambassador to the US and subsequently became King Abdullah’s national security advisor, coordinated Saudi cooperation with the US. Qatar prepared to lend financial assistance to the new Iraqi regime after its establishment. Several months after the invasion, Qatar readily agreed to allow the US military to establish its main headquarters on its soil instead of in Saudi Arabia, which had reconsidered its position. The Saudis attempted to show the region that they did not fully agree with US policy. In contrast, Qatar had no hesitations about hosting the American headquarters, where it has been ever since.
After the war's end, the GCC still did not develop a clear, agreed-upon course of action. Instead of taking an active role or proposing a future vision for the Iraqi state and its external relations with the Gulf, the GCC took a reactive position, responding to events as they developed. GCC states had no intelligence contacts with any of Iraq’s sectarian groups, not even with their co-religionist Sunni groups. It appeared that under Saddam’s regime, the GCC had been reluctant to develop such contacts and this hindered the GCC's ability to influence Iraq’s evolution in the months after the invasion.

The first challenge that emerged from the US occupation of Iraq, which became a dramatic threat to the GCC, was the rise in activity of Sunni terrorist groups, mainly al-Qaida and its branches of jihadist organizations. While the rise in terrorist violence occurred after the invasion, al-Qaida cells had existed in a dormant state in Saudi Arabia for some time. Seemingly, due to the American invasion of Iraq as well as Saudi operations against al-Qaida in the Kingdom, the group's leaders decided to launch a campaign of terrorism in Saudi Arabia itself.

Bin Ladin’s Militant Opposition to the Saudi State

Osama Bin Ladin, the al-Qaida leader, was born in Saudi Arabia to a South Yemenite immigrant family. Evidently he developed the viewpoint of an outsider interested in minimizing differences between his original Shafi’i judicial affiliation and the Wahhabi system, the prevalent form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. He also sought to unify Muslims of different nationalities: Yemeni, Saudi, Palestinian, Egyptian, Afghani, and Pakistani. This was successfully done in the crystallization of al-Qaida in the 1980s in Afghanistan, where Muslims of different origins fought together under the religious leadership of clergymen such as Abd al-Majid al-Zindani of Yemen, Ayman al-Zawahiri of Egypt, and the Palestinian Abdullah Azzam. There were likely hundreds of Saudis who fought in Afghanistan alongside Bin Ladin and returned home in the early 1990s having expelling a superpower from a Muslim territory.23

The motives of Bin Ladin to fight the Saudi establishment were threefold: First, he endeavored to end the dominance of Western
powers in the Muslim world, which he referred to as the “Jewish-Christian crusade.” Under attack from these forces, all Muslims had the obligation to rise up in jihad against the West. According to Bin Ladin, this was especially true in Saudi Arabia, where Western troops were stationed on holy soil. Second, Bin Ladin’s anger at the Saudi rulers for turning to US forces in defense against Iraq during the Second Gulf War had not abated. He believed that the Saudi rulers must be punished, thus, hindering cooperation between the Saudis and the West became a main goal. Third, Bin Ladin was influenced by a combination of personal ideological sources, including his Wahhabi upbringing in Jidda, where he learned of the ideas of purifying Islamic sites from infidel influences, and the writings of radical Muslim Brethren such as Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam.24

In short, al-Qaida wanted to create shari’a rule to fight Western “occupying” forces in Muslim territories, and to weaken the regimes that supported them. Bin Ladin accused King Fahd of shirk – idol worship, serving the American powers, and allowing the Kingdom to become a colony of the US. He advocated jihad against the Saudi state to expel the Western forces and called for the eventual spread of this battle to all Muslim arenas and America itself. After his expulsion from the Saudi Kingdom in 1994, Bin Ladin reestablished al-Qaida in Sudan and Afghanistan as a force capable of attacking targets all over the world. Saudi officials ignored his activities in a tacit agreement that they would leave him alone on the condition that his forces did not operate in the Kingdom. But this agreement lasted only until 2003, when his followers began committing acts of terrorism against the Saudi state.

Prior to al-Qaida’s campaign against the Saudis in May 2003, there were already centers of religious unrest in the Gulf. In Yemen, a group of followers of Abd al-Majid al-Zindani attacked a US warship, the USS Cole, in October 2000 in the port of Aden. This act was considered inspiration for al-Qaida’s activities in the Asir province, the Saudi territory bordering Yemen. Several individuals from this group were among the 15 Saudis who participated in the September 11 attacks. In the northern region of al-Jawf, bordering Jordan and Iraq, the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada and the limited assistance provided by the Arab states led a large number of residents
to stage a series of demonstrations that often turned into riots. Their slogans were critical of the Saudi royal family.  

Al-Qaida’s campaign of violence in the Saudi Kingdom began on May 12, 2003, in response to Saudi Arabia’s support for the American occupation of Iraq. These actions were also a pre-emptive move against the Saudi government, which was planning to arrest many al-Qaida activists. Bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders decided to depart from the ceasefire with the Saudis and activate dormant al-Qaida cells in the Kingdom, focused on undermining the Saudi monarchy by driving a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the West. Al-Qaida was able to activate an entire infrastructure of safe houses, ammunition depots, and support networks.

There were disagreements among al-Qaida leaders regarding the timing and potential targets of attack. The group’s commander within Saudi Arabia, Yusuf Ayiri, was vocal with his concerns regarding lack of preparation and time, shortage of resources, and inefficiency of supply routes from Yemen. Despite the general al-Qaida approach of extreme patience and steady development of support networks capable of inflicting a major attack, Egyptian ideologue Zawahiri advocated the attack of soft targets, such as Americans in Saudi Arabia, even at the expense of Saudi Muslim bystander casualties. With time, this method backfired, as it alienated public support and Zawahiri was overruled by Bin Ladin so as not to compromise the future strength of al-Qaida.  

Saudi terrorism can be divided into three main stages. Stage one lasted from May to August 2003, when attacks were directed at Westerners residing in Saudi Arabia, mainly in residential and military compounds. Most notable among these attacks was the opening wave on May 12, when suicide bombers attacked compounds housing foreign workers in Riyadh, killing 25 and wounding 200. Stage two, from August to November 2003, saw attacks directed against Saudi security forces and offices, as well as Saudi civilians. As a consequence, the perpetrators came under mounting criticism for the bloodshed, even from a number of sympathetic clergymen, forcing the attackers to choose their targets more carefully.
Stage three began in November 2003 and continued into 2004, and was marked by the abduction and killing of Western residents and visitors working with Saudi security agencies. On April 21, 2004, a suicide bomber attacked a government building in Riyadh, killing five. On May 29, militants attacked an oil company and housing compound in al-Khubar, killing seven Saudi policemen and 22 civilians, and taking 50 hostages. Between May 22 and September 26, at least seven Westerners were killed in various incidents, most of whom were working for companies doing business with Saudi security services. In response to these attacks, Saudi security forces began to raid and attack al-Qaida strongholds, killing and capturing many operatives. These operations included a raid on November 9, 2004 that led to the capture of Sultan al-Utaibi, a prominent figure on Saudi Arabia’s list of terrorists. On November 27 and December 2, Saudi security forces killed and captured additional militants.

The civilians hit in these attacks included both foreign workers, detrimental to the Saudi economy, and Americans – part of an effort to further exacerbate tensions between the US and Saudi Arabia that had emerged after September 11. Ultimately, Bin Ladin wanted to overthrow the royal family and the Saudi government. However, al-Qaida's plan was not far-reaching, and its attacks were limited. In their struggle, the terrorists achieved two major goals: they were able to spread their influence throughout the Gulf, and they were able to pose a significant threat to the Kingdom’s security, especially to Western oil and security installations.27

While Saudi security services had been collecting intelligence on al-Qaida throughout the 1990s, after September 11, the Saudis began to cooperate with US forces against Bin Ladin in Afghanistan and announced their intention to sever ties with the Taliban. Following the 2003 attacks, a list of senior operatives was created, leading to the killing and capture of high ranking al-Qaida leaders, including Ayiri himself. This disrupted the activities of the various cells and undermined their autonomy. The second wave of leaders was not as successful as the first, which led to the weakening of the network. The severe blow dealt by the Saudi security forces combined with propaganda campaigns waged by the authorities and low recruitment rates depleted al-Qaida's leadership pool and forced the group to turn
to inexperienced operatives. The Saudi government also detained over 600 individuals suspected of ties to terrorist organizations. Additionally, internal security was tightened and Saudi counter-terror capabilities improved through cooperation with other states, eventually creating a new commanding authority in the Interior Ministry committed to the fight against terror. Al-Qaeda encountered difficulty combating this new Saudi security apparatus. 28

**Terrorism and Iraq**

The terrorism faced by the GCC states had a disjointed nature – it could fade in one arena and rekindle in another. Indeed, this was problematic for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states because they regarded the war in Iraq as a magnet for Sunni terrorists, who came from different corners of the Arab world – Yemen, Saudi Arabia itself, and other Gulf states, as well as from Lebanon and Syria. What resulted was a cycle of terrorist movements and activities that strengthened one another. Thus, some of the Yemeni activists became al-Qaeda members and eventually leaders, like Ayiri and one of his successors, Muhammad al-Awfi.

While many activists traveled to Saudi Arabia, some traveled to Kuwait and carried out attacks there too. 29 Kuwaiti extremists helped terrorists infiltrate Iraq and, to an extent, provided them with money and logistical support. Al-Qaeda activists also found their way into Iraq, but their numbers in Iraq constituted no more than 10-12 percent of all Sunni fighters. 30 Others have estimated that as much as 45-75 percent of Sunni activists in Iraq were Saudi citizens, but those numbers seem improbable given that most of the militants were Iraqi, Jordanian, and Syrian. 31 There was a certain fear among all of the Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, that the terrorists would not only wreak havoc in Iraq, but upon return from Iraq would also carry out attacks in the Gulf. There was also a fear that terrorist activities in Iraq would further be fueled by rifts between Kurds, Shi’i Arabs, and Sunni Arabs, and that each group would cultivate its own terror squad, which would expand beyond Iraq’s borders. While the Saudi or Kuwaiti governments could suppress domestic Sunni extremism through intelligence or military force, they were powerless over the situation in Iraq.
The challenge of Sunni terrorism was further complicated by the fact that Saudi individuals, perhaps with tacit agreement from the government, had been financing extremist Sunni bodies all over the Middle East, as well as in the US. Already in late 2002, the Saudi government pledged to the US that it would cut these financial ties. In December 2002, 33 bank accounts belonging to three Saudi individuals were frozen pending an investigation, causing the government great embarrassment when it became public knowledge. Saudi leaders were unsure of the extent to which its nationals had been aiding extremist Sunni groups in Iraq and were unable to control the flow of money to these terrorists.\(^3^2\)

In Kurdistan in September 2003, a prominent militant group known as Ansar al-Islam (later the Ansar al-Sunna Army) dedicated themselves to fighting US occupation forces.\(^3^3\) In October 2004, an individual known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi appeared in Iraq, gaining major influence among the extremist organizations there and quickly becoming the paramount terrorist leader. Born in 1966 in Zarqa, Jordan, Zarqawi received his training in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and was the disciple of a well-known Jordanian extremist theologian, Abu-Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Zarqawi was active in Jordan, Afghanistan, and Iraqi Kurdistan, working with various organizations until he established his own group in Iraq, \textit{al-Tawhid wal-Jihad}.

In December 2004, Bin Ladin released an audio recording welcoming Zarqawi’s accession to power and rewarded him with the title “Amir of al-Qaida Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers,” instating him as the official head of al-Qaida in Iraq. Originally, al-Qaida was based in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and to some extent the smaller GCC states. It is possible that Bin Ladin realized that prospects of success were slim in Saudi Arabia itself, but that Iraq, because of the American presence and the active anti-US opposition, was a more appealing arena for al-Qaida activists, like Ayman al-Zawahiri. He believed that turmoil and disorder in Iraq would act in al-Qaida’s favor, creating a hotbed for effective mobilization and activation of \textit{jihadists}. 
Under Zarqawi’s leadership, al-Qaida in Iraq was well-organized, and extremely violent, and Saudi Arabia’s ability to suppress al-Qaida in the Gulf did not affect the group’s Iraq activities. The leaders of al-Qaida in Saudi Arabia were pleased with the results in Iraq, which counter-balanced the rise of Shi'i power there, and they were content to let the Iraqi branch continue unhindered. Each branch lent moral support to the other, praising its counterpart’s leaders and activities, and a number of Saudi al-Qaida activists actually went to Iraq and fought under Zarqawi. Yet, there was barely any formal cooperation between the two branches.

The majority of fighters in Iraq, under Zarqawi’s leadership, were not of the Wahhabi theology or disciples of the radical Egyptian scholar Qutb or the Yemeni scholar Zindani, but were from Iraqi, Palestinian, and Jordanian backgrounds. A major implication of this difference was the emergence of an ideological fixation on fighting the Shi'i majority in addition to the Americans. For years, this demographic had been suppressed, despite comprising about 60 percent of the Iraqi population. But, since the US occupation, the interim governments of Iraq have all been led by Shi'i prime ministers, with Shi'is filling many ministries and top positions.

Some of the worst acts of violence against Shi'is were carried out by Zarqawi’s supporters, beginning in September 2003 with the assassination of a leading Shi'i scholar, Ayatollah al-Hakim. Other brutal activities, such as the al-Askari Mosque bombing on February 22, 2006, were symbolic of Zarqawi’s abilities and ideology. Consequently, the Shi'i population became agitated, leading to the rise of militant Shi'a in Iraq. For Gulf states, this meant that in addition to preventing Sunni terrorism out of Iraq, they also had to consider the threat of Shi'i terrorism.

Zarqawi’s attitude towards the Shi'a was rejected by many fellow Sunni clerics, and even by jihadists who supported his campaign against the American forces. This developed into a long debate with his former teacher, Maqdisi, who did not endorse Zarqawi's willingness to kill innocent Iraqis, even if they were Shi'is. Zarqawi was not deterred by his detractors. According to his rationale, the fight against the Americans in Iraq should lead to chaos, not just
killing. The prevailing chaos would prove both that the Americans were powerless to protect the Iraqi government and that the Shi'is were unable to sustain a functioning regime in Iraq. Consequently, Muslims everywhere would rise to the aid of al-Qaida in their battle against these two devils. Zarqawi thus aimed to instigate a sectarian war in addition to his war against the US occupation.

In Iraq itself, this strategy provoked militant Shi'i groups to retaliate. The majority Shi'is started a process of integration into the Iraqi establishment after the Americans toppled Saddam's regime. There were political parties, such as al-Da'wa led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, in addition to other factions led by notable Shi'is such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has been considered the main Shi'i religious authority – the marja – in Iraq. After the US occupation, Sistani offered to cooperate with the American forces and the new government. There were some Shi'i groups, however, that remained outside the orbit of government collaboration and, like Zarqawi, saw fighting the US occupation as their main objective.

The main group associated with this trend was the Mahdist Army (the Army of the Savior), led by the young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The son of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sadr, a popular Shi'i cleric killed by Saddam in 1991, Muqtada represented the Shi'i militant personality, receiving information, training, and perhaps even weapons from Lebanese Hizballah. The Mahdist Army not only acted against American and Iraqi government forces, but also against Sunni civilians.

Sadr played a role in the murder of a major Shi'i rival cleric, Grand Ayatollah Abd al-Majid al-Khu'i, on April 10, 2003, and his forces occasionally clashed with Sistani’s near the Imam Husayn shrine. He was able to form a coalition of forces loyal to extremist opposition figures and to assert his influence in Najaf, Sadr City, and Baghdad, posing a major challenge to the Iraqi government since 2004. He then began openly targeting American forces, and since 2005, he and his Mahdist Army have been associated with various kidnappings and political assassinations.
From 2004-2006, it was evident that despite Ayatollah Sistani’s religious prestige and influence, he did not act to stop Sadr’s activities or to restrain him in any way. This undermined the governments of Iyad Alawi and Nuri al-Maliki, whose regimes had great difficulty bringing order to Iraq and curbing violence. Only in 2006 did Sistani call upon the Iraqi people to disband all armed militias and keep weapons solely within the sphere of the official armed forces and the police.

The rise in Shi‘i activity signaled a further threat to the GCC states, who feared the impact of Shi‘i violence in Iraq, particularly the spread of Iraqi sectarian warfare to the Gulf. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, an estimated 20 percent of the population is Shi‘i, living mostly in the Gulf region and near oil installations. Since many are employed by oil companies, the main fear was that they might disrupt oil operations. Additionally, Gulf Shi‘is might act as agents for spreading Iranian Khomeinist or Iraqi Sadrist ideology. Bahrain’s population is about 50-60 percent Shi‘i, out of a total of 650,000 people. In Kuwait, they make up roughly 10-20 percent of a population of about two million.

Gulf leaders considered the history of the Shi‘is in their own states, one of discrimination and fear of the Sunni majority. Although in the twentieth century the Shi‘is were tolerated by Sunni ruling regimes, they were discriminated against and constantly lived in fear of Sunni violence. Thus, another identified threat was that of potential Shi‘i infiltrators from Iraq entering GCC states in order to organize communities against local Sunni populations. In Kuwait, such instances occurred, but the government successfully intercepted and arrested the infiltrators.

GCC leaders’ fears were fed by the memories of earlier Shi‘i terrorism. From 1979-1982, Shi‘i communities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain created popular organizations influenced by the Shi‘i Islamic Revolution in Iran. Since then, these groups have, in a way, been followers of the religious leadership and authority – the marja‘iyya – of Khomeini and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamene‘i. In the early 1980s, these Shi‘i communities were known for conducting terrorist activities in their respective countries. For example, in 1987, a Saudi Arabian branch of Hizballah emerged, but
its success was limited. As well, in June 1995 and November 1996, two bombings that targeted US troops may have been carried out by Shi‘i terrorists. Despite the subsequent lull in their campaign, this was an indication that Shi‘is could be mobilized and incited to violence against governments in the Gulf.

In Bahrain, in the 1990s, there was a rise in Shi‘i demonstrations and riots focused on reopening the national assembly. The new ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad, adopted a new constitution in December 1997, and Bahrain officially became a constitutional monarchy in 2002, holding elections for the first time in 29 years. Some Shi‘i groups boycotted the elections while others supported the new regime. The new ruler, who called himself a king rather than an *amir*, instituted a “carrot and stick” policy vis-à-vis the Shi‘i community. In May 2004, he sacked the hard-line interior minister who had used a heavy-hand to crush Shi‘i protests in the 1990s and apologized in public for the suppression of anti-American Shi‘i demonstration. However, police forces continued to clash with Shi‘i protesters. The Sunni population of Bahrain believed that the unrest was an attempt by the Shi‘i population to shatter the regime.44

The majority of Shi‘i communities in the Gulf states remained quiet, and the governments endeavored to maintain this calm. In Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah, who acceded to the throne in 2005, though he had been the effective ruler since 1996 due to King Fahd's illness, attempted reconciliation with the Shi‘i community leaders. He invited secular and religious figures to meet with him and his Sunni counterparts, attempting to attenuate feelings of discrimination and better integrate the Shi‘is into society. One such initiative was the inclusion of Shi‘i community leaders in the National Dialogue, a set of seasonal meetings between Saudi social organizations. In addition to the Shi‘is, various groups, including women’s rights organizations, youth groups, and Bedouin groups, participated in these meetings in an attempt to promote coexistence and tolerance among the communities.45

Nonetheless, due to sectarian tensions, Shi‘i communities were regarded with suspicion and faced constant pressure to prove that they had not forged alliances with hostile elements in Iran.46 The fear of an
Iranian attempt to exploit the Shi'i rise-up in Iraq in order to infiltrate the Gulf has remained a perennial concern for Gulf governments. This was part of what Arab leaders referred to as the rise of the "Shi'i crescent," the emergence of a broad coalition of Shi'is in the Gulf and in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, whose strategic implications are discussed in the next chapter.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), with the exception of small fringe groups, the Iraqi Shi'is did not associate with the Iranian regime of the Ayatollahs and remained loyal to Iraq. Following the war, however, Saddam’s regime brutally suppressed a Shi'i uprising in southern Iraq, involving mass killings of Shi'i civilians. Iran was the only nation that expressed sympathy for the Iraqi Shi'is by sheltering refugees. Some 100,000 Iraqi Shi'is have taken refuge in Iran since the massacres of 1991. There has also been certain religious cooperation between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is, like the cooperation between Ali al-Sistani of Najaf and Shi'i religious communities in Iran, especially in the holy city of Qom. However, there remain historic differences of opinions and views between the marjas – religious authorities – of Iranian Qom and those of southern Iraq. Moreover, there are ethnic differences, since a large majority of Iranian Shi'is are Persian while the Iraqi Shi'is are mostly Arab.47

Gulf governments still feared that Iran was behind the disruptive activities of Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdist Army and that Iran would try to increase its influence in Iraq. The visit of Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad to Iraq in September 2006, as well as the red carpet welcome he received from Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, indicated to Gulf leaders the potential of such regional cooperation.48 Furthermore, Gulf leaders, especially those in Saudi Arabia, feared the vacillation and unreliability of the Iraqi government. They regarded the interim Prime Minister, Iyad al-Alawi, as too weak to pose a challenge to Zarqawi and his activities or to Shi'i radicals. Zarqawi was finally killed in June 2006 by the Americans.

The Saudis did not view positively Maliki, who took power in 2006, as they saw two dangers: First, they regarded him as weak and unable to unite Iraq and stop sectarian violence. Second, they feared that he was in fact collaborating with Shi'i extremists and secretly harboring...
pro-Shi'a, or even pro-Iranian, loyalties. They worried that under US protection, Maliki’s regime was handing the entirety of Iraq, perhaps with the exception of Kurdistan, to the Shi’is. Thus, not only did the Saudis not accept him for an official visit, but they also refrained from establishing an official embassy in Iraq after the US occupation. In contrast, the governments of Kuwait and Qatar were ready to host him in addition to supplying his government with financial aid. In their view, reestablishing good relations with Iraq was critical, particularly to please the US administration.

The Threat and the Gulf Response

As Iraq proved to be a source of hostile influences, any Iraqi government, notably if it was Shi'i-led, could pose a future risk to the Gulf by turning the country into an Iranian ally instead of acting as a counter-balance. Moreover, under the protection of US forces, the Shi'i-led government gained added legitimacy and strength. The Saudis therefore pressured US forces in Iraq to change the regime composition into something more favorable, preferably dominated by Arabism and Sunnism. The Saudis hoped this would set a safe precedent for the Shi‘is in the Gulf.

Iran, for its part, has not exploited the turmoil in Iraq in order to position itself as the dominant influence after the Americans leave, or to spur Iraqi Shi‘is to expand their activities into the Gulf. Its apparent interest is to maintain a certain level of influence over Shi‘i activity in Iraq, but not to overthrow the entire regime.

In 2006, the understanding was that the danger of Shi‘i terrorism or a Shi‘i uprising in the Gulf was not imminent. Nonetheless, there was a sustained level of fear in the GCC that sectarian conflict was a serious threat. The Iraqi model is a stark vision and reminder of a possible reality in the Gulf, given the mixed Sunni-Shi‘i population. Thus, in February 2006, when Sunni radicals bombed the al-Askari shrine in Iraq, more than 100,000 people, mostly Shi‘is, demonstrated in Bahrain. Likewise, it was Bahraini Sunnis who protested the American siege of Fallujah, once a haven for insurgents operating in the Sunni triangle. Gulf leaders did not devise initiatives regarding the future of Iraq or how to resolve Iraq’s sectarian conflict. Their
constant fear kept them in a defensive state of mind, fixated on the issue of how to maintain the status quo in the Gulf and prevent threats emanating from Iraq. Three main responses of the GCC states towards the Iraqi predicament should be noted. First is the Saudi Arabian response. The Saudis organized the Mecca Conference in October 2006, between the leading clerics of different Iraqi sects, to bridge sectarian and religious differences. The deliberations and the agreement reached at the conference were not publicized, but the conference aimed at closing the ranks of Muslims in Iraq. In attendance were Sunni and Shi'i groups from Iraq as well as from other Muslim states. All of them were interested in establishing an anti-jihadi front in Iraq. GCC Secretary General Abd al-Rahman al-Attiyah praised the conference and its leaders. A leading Saudi alim (cleric), Sheikh Abd al-Musim al-Ubaykan, a member of the Saudi Shura (consultative) Council, was present and helped bring about an agreement, though it brought little change to the situation in Iraq. The conference demonstrated the Saudis’ willingness to at least give the impression of mediating in favor of Iraqi stability. However, they intervened very little in Iraqi politics, and in their attempt to prevent infiltration of sectarian violence, they began constructing a wall along their border with Iraq. Furthermore, the Saudis pressured the US to keep its forces in Iraq, as it seemed that the Americans might pull out in the autumn of 2006. When US public opinion began to favor withdrawal from Iraq, and after the US bi-partisan Baker-Hamilton committee published its recommendations (December 2006), such a development became more likely. The Saudis told US Vice President Richard Cheney in November 2006 that they could not accept a situation whereby American forces would leave Iraq while Nuri al-Maliki’s government remained in power. They actually threatened to assist radical religious groups in Iraq, perhaps the Sunni insurgents or even al-Qaida cells, if such a situation were to arise, as a means to strengthen the Sunni parties there. It is somewhat ironic that Saudi leaders, while fighting al-Qaida forces in Saudi territory, threatened to help Sunni radical groups in Iraq (including, possibly, al-Qaida) to overpower and eliminate their Shi'i opponents. The surge of US forces in Iraq that
actually followed was a major factor in bringing relative stability to the situation in Iraq during 2007-2008.

A different response came from Kuwait. Despite the deposition of Saddam Hussein, Kuwait still viewed Iraq as an extension of Saddam’s regime and the main threat to its security. Kuwaitis were unwilling to change their uncompromising attitudes toward Iraq and their fears lingered, despite the establishment of a new Iraqi government several months after the US invasion. In January 2004, Kuwait objected to the lifting of UN sanctions on Iraq until all Iraqi compensation and obligations to Kuwait, dating from the Iraqi invasion of 1990, were fulfilled. Kuwait also objected to the new Iraqi National Congress’ request to acquire Iraqi sea outlets in the Persian Gulf (the closest Iraqi port to Persian Gulf waters was Umm Qasr, in the Shatt al-Arab river; the Iraqis did not have direct access to Gulf waters). The deputy head of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, Walid al-Tabtaba’i, expressed Kuwait’s fear of Iraqi expansion by questioning the new Iraqi leadership. In the Kuwaiti view, the new leaders could still turn out to be a version of Saddam with expansionist intentions. Tabtaba’i opposed any change to the 150 km land border between the two states, including any Iraqi expansion into the Gulf that would bring Iraqi forces closer to Kuwait. Kuwait, however, was not ready to intervene in Iraqi affairs in order to reshape the political balance of power.

A third response toward post-invasion issues emanated from the GCC states' persistence in viewing most of the region's problems through the prism of terrorism. This can be explained by the rise and strengthening of al-Qaida and the growing sectarianism in Iraq, evidence that the region was a possible hotbed of terrorist activities. In February 2004, the leaders of the GCC states met in Kuwait and formed an anti-terror pact aimed at expanding intelligence cooperation and putting an end to the illicit funding of jihadists. This decision reiterated the GCC states’ readiness to suppress terrorism internally. It did not prompt them to intervene in Iraq politically, surely not militarily. GCC Secretary General Attiyah commented that the GCC states would not send soldiers to Iraq to aid coalition forces.
Oman believed, as expressed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi, that its own soldiers as well as those of Morocco and Bahrain should participate in the coalition, but nothing came of it. This was typical, as Oman had always participated, or at least attempted to participate, in security initiatives in the Gulf, thinking that it was a way to reinforce its role as the protector of the Hormuz Straits (located on Oman’s northern shore), prove its abilities, and make itself useful to both the US and its neighbors. But as noted above, the GCC was not ready to send troops to Iraq.\textsuperscript{59}

As for the relationship between Iraq and the GCC states, after 2006, ties began cautiously improving. Iraq no longer posed a radical threat to the conservative monarchies as it did under Saddam, nor did it possess the military might to threaten Gulf states conventionally. Nevertheless, GCC states approached the Shi’i-dominated government with suspicion and worried that Iraq may eventually come under the influence of Iran, altering the balance of power in the Gulf region. Thus, GCC states have continued to rely on the US as a way to ensure their security against Iraq. Since 2006, Kuwait has continued to stress its cooperation with the US-led war on terror and its strong relationship with America. Kuwait has continued to coordinate with the US on regional issues through the US-Kuwait Gulf Security Dialogue, a forum for strategic coordination between the US and Gulf states.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, Kuwaiti officials have expressed public support for the relationship between Washington and Baghdad, especially in the field of security cooperation.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have expressed great interest in maintaining stability in Iraq. However, Kuwaiti leaders preferred to work to this end through cooperation with Washington and Tehran instead of Baghdad, and coordination with US and Iranian officials has been greater than with the new Iraqi government.\textsuperscript{61} In April 2008, Kuwait finally announced the opening of an embassy in Baghdad, and in October, the first Kuwaiti diplomatic mission arrived in Iraq since Saddam’s invasion in 1990. This move was met with widespread praise by Arab League and UN officials as well as heads of state. Kuwait, while obviously remaining wary of Iraq, has proven that it is ready to play a diplomatic role.\textsuperscript{62} Its participation in a host of multilateral conferences on stability and reconstruction between Iraq,
its neighbors, and the permanent members of the UN Security Council, in conjunction with repeated declarations in favor of a peaceful and sovereign Iraq, has been the extent of Kuwait’s involvement in recent years. But, in June 2009, ties between the two states took a nosedive after a disagreement over the forgiveness of Iraq’s reparations and debt to Kuwait. This suggests that Kuwait has continued to view Iraq as a possible source of aggression and seeks to limit the extent of the relationship forged between the two states while continuing to support restabilization efforts.

The UAE, several months after Kuwait, also decided to reopen its embassy in Baghdad, and additionally, declared it would cancel about $4 billion of Iraqi debt, heeding a plea by Prime Minister Maliki to help stabilize his country’s economy. This increased willingness to make concessions to the Iraqi government, especially over debt forgiveness, signals a growing acceptance by Arab leaders of Iraq’s Shi’i-led government.

While a number of GCC leaders were willing to improve ties with the Maliki government, other GCC states, notably Saudi Arabia, were more hesitant to reestablish diplomatic relations with Iraq, and have lagged behind Kuwait in reopening their embassies in Baghdad. Moreover, Maliki has accused Saudi leaders of not doing enough to stem the flow of support from Saudi Arabia to Sunni terrorists in Iraq. Thus, it appears that relations between Baghdad and Riyadh, which have been historically troubled, continue to be fraught with conflict and suspicion. While Iraqi officials view Saudi support as necessary for the stabilization of their country, Saudi leaders have occasionally accused Baghdad of allowing Iraqi radicals into Saudi Arabia.

Though Saudi and Kuwaiti forces dealt a severe defeat to Sunni activists operating within their borders, and the threat of Shi’i terrorism from Iraq – instigated by Iran – did not crystallize, the problem of terrorism has not been resolved. Al-Qaida appears to have lost a great deal of momentum in Saudi Arabia since 2005-2006, but their operations have not ceased entirely, nor has Saudi concern faded. In mid-August 2009, Saudi security forces arrested 44
members of an al-Qaida cell operating in the Kingdom and seized a large cache of weapons.\textsuperscript{66} Only days later, there was a failed attempt on the life of Prince Muhammad bin Na’if, the Deputy Minister of Interior, claimed by al-Qaida.\textsuperscript{67} Most recently, Saudi leaders have begun to focus their concern on the situation in Yemen, which has become a center for both Shi’i militancy and al-Qaida activism.\textsuperscript{68} Other GCC states have also uncovered a number of planned terror attacks. Notably, Kuwait arrested activists planning to attack a US base in Kuwait in August 2009.\textsuperscript{69} Al-Qaida continues to threaten the security of the GCC states, and has directed its ire not only toward Saudi “apostasy,” but also toward symbols of capitalism in the Gulf, particularly in the commercially flourishing emirate of Dubai.\textsuperscript{70} Thus, the GCC states must continue to combat the ever-present threat of Gulf terrorism.

To sum up, instead of developing a comprehensive strategy and readapting the regional, diplomatically-oriented aspects of their defense strategy to cope with the post-2003 terrorist threat, the GCC states responded individually. With Saudi Arabia setting the example, several GCC states were able to suppress the organizations threatening their regimes. In this case, Saudi Arabia, followed quietly by the other GCC states, avoided direct intervention in Iraq. They instead opted to rely on US military backing, demanding that US troops be reinforced rather than evacuate and hand over power to Maliki’s Shi’i-led government, in order to keep the situation in Iraq under control.\textsuperscript{71} GCC leaders seemingly realized that in this case, their regional diplomatic contacts would not be effective in neutralizing terror groups, the activities of which were nurtured by radical Islamist doctrines and the dynamics of sectarian warfare. The results on the ground showed that the US “surge” improved the security situation in Iraq as did the Gulf states’ ability to counter terrorist infiltration into their territories from Iraq. In May 2009, Saudi Interior Minister Na’if bin Abd al-Aziz, when questioned about the appropriate GCC response to events in Iraq, replied that it would be necessary to consult the other GCC member states, implying that there was no intention to develop a coordinated policy of intervention.\textsuperscript{72}
CHAPTER 3

THE GRADUAL RISE OF THE IRANIAN THREAT

The Shift of Attention from Iraq to Iran

From 2003 to 2009, military cooperation between the Gulf states and the US focused on Iraq. Kuwait provided major air and ground bases for US forces in Iraq, as well as important port facilities. Bahrain was the base of the US 5th fleet and a main staging point for US naval and air operations. Qatar hosted the US headquarters, an air operations center, aviation facilities, port facilities, and pre-positioning facilities for reinforcing US brigades in Iraq. In Oman, the US maintained air and naval staging facilities and pre-positioning facilities at Masirah Island, just off the eastern coast in the Arabian Sea; however, Oman’s assistance was unspecified and did not concern any specific enemy.

Regarding the Iranian threat, it was mainly the UAE that assisted the US by providing extensive port facilities, shipyards, and intelligence cooperation. The UAE has considered Iran as its most significant security threat since Iranian forces took control of the island of Abu Musa in 1992. Indeed, US-initiated training operation Eagle Resolve, hosted by the UAE in 2004, portrayed Iran as the antagonist.\(^7\)

With the exception of the UAE, however, the GCC states failed to identify Iran as a full-scale threat. Most of them were ready to continue treating Iran as they had previously, maintaining maritime cooperation and trade relations.\(^7\) Under President Mohammad Khatami, the Iranian relationship with the Gulf states was cordial and cooperative. Iran, as well, did not pursue an active anti-American policy, which would have openly defied the balance of power in Iraq.

Iran’s aims after the US occupation were twofold. First, as a defensive move, it wanted to prevent American aggression toward Tehran. This is often expressed by Iran as a resistance to “strangulation.” Second, Iran wished to encourage the consolidation of Iraq’s Shi’i-dominated government. For Tehran this was a welcome change after Saddam’s Sunni-dominated regime. Thus, while critical of Washington’s presence in Iraq, Iran did not cause a commotion around Iraqi politics.
and the American influence in the region. The GCC states were ready to accept this policy, and consequently, did not develop a new strategy vis-à-vis Iran.  

Under these circumstances, in December 2004, at the GCC Foreign Ministers Conference, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal envisioned a collective security arrangement that would bring Yemen, Iraq, and Iran into partnership with the GCC states and give the role of security guarantor to the UN Security Council. The initiative presented a Saudi and pan-GCC interest in developing an arrangement for broad, strategic regional cooperation in which the international community would be active. This was less a concrete plan of action than it was an attempt to appear receptive to cooperation with Tehran. At this stage, Khatami’s Iran did not seem overly hostile, and the GCC states were too preoccupied with Iraq to develop a feasible and effective security arrangement to address the Iranian threat.

**Coping with Iran’s Growing Regional Aspirations**

In 2005, Iran’s regional policy became more ambitious after the election of a new president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who seemed to have hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East. The main element of this new era was Iran’s attempt to develop nuclear energy. The project was not new, but the regime pursued nuclear development much more vociferously than its predecessors. Ahmadinejad and other Iranian spokesmen portrayed their program as an attempt to develop nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes only, and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i, publicly disavowed Iranian intentions to develop nuclear weapons. Due to international distrust of Iranian intentions, this ambition caused increased friction between Iran and Western nations. The US rejected any Iranian attempt to attain nuclear capability, be it peaceful or not, fearing the ultimate development of nuclear weapons.

Israel, too, saw itself as particularly affected and would not tolerate an Iran with nuclear capabilities, especially in conjunction with repeated Iranian assertions that “Israel has no right to exist.” Iran continued to call for Israel’s obliteration and armed Hizballah in Lebanon with
missiles that allowed them to attack the populated areas in Israel. Gulf leaders feared that Middle Eastern parties, such as Israel and Lebanon, along with US forces in Iraq, may become involved in the outbreak of a dispute with Iran. This could lead to regional destabilization, something that the Gulf states could not accept.  

Toward the end of 2006, senior Iranian official Muhsin Razai, Secretary of the Expediency Council, explained how the Iranian leadership, notably Ahmadinejad, understood the regional procession of events caused by the US conquest of Iraq. America’s arrival to the region presented Iran with a unique opportunity, as “no superpower has ever done anything similar,” he said. America had destroyed Iran’s regional enemies: the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, and intended to “confront [Iran] face to face in order to place us under siege. But the American teeth stuck in the soil of Iraq and Afghanistan.” For the first time in many years, Iran was hindered neither by rival regional forces nor by American forces, which were entangled in the Iraqi quagmire. While Iran’s initial goal was to prevent the US from threatening it, by 2005 the Iranians were confident enough to take a more offensive stance, as they began to give matériel support to militant Shi’is.  

GCC leaders feared that Iran would expand its influence and role outside of the Gulf in the greater Middle Eastern theater, possibly capitalizing on powerful allies such as Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon. Hizballah's leaders were Shi’i clerics who had studied in Iran and were committed to Khomeini’s ideas of an Islamic revival and war against Israel and the US. With nuclear capabilities, Iran could ensure its supremacy both in the Gulf and in the Fertile Crescent region and would be able to dictate regional policies. Iran might eventually be able to control oil prices and all Gulf imports and exports through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran might also try to impose normative religious behavior, notably Shi’i practices, on the smaller, vulnerable Gulf states. While these threats may have been the worst-case scenario, the GCC states feared that the rise of Iran could have a severe negative impact on the Gulf region, which required greater attention.
Arab Gulf leaders viewed the emerging axis, consisting of Iran, Syria, and Shi'i movements in Iraq and Lebanon, as a "Shi'i crescent," in the words of Jordanian King Abdullah II. It could develop into an alliance opposing the moderate Sunni states, such as those in the Gulf and Egypt. However, the Arab writer al-Afifi instead referred to the Iranian grouping as a counter-imperial axis. He compared the Iran-Syria position to that of Abd al-Nasir's Egypt in the 1950s or Saddam’s Iraq in 1990. Iran took the lead in creating a pact that would oppose Western or American hegemony in the region.80

How did the GCC states respond to these new challenges? As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia had been encouraging the GCC states to envision a multilateral security framework that could operate in Iraq under the umbrella of the UN and include the GCC states as well as Iraq, Iran, and Yemen.81 Saudi leaders thereby wished to avoid a confrontation with Iran, and instead sought to contain its power within a broad regional body.

Bahrain was particularly worried about Iraqi sectarian tensions and the encouragement Iran gave to Iraqi Shi'is, all of whom had the potential to arouse the Shi'i majority in Bahrain. The rulers of Bahrain viewed this threat as their most pressing concern, potentially jeopardizing their plan to expand their national guard and reform the national assembly.

Regarding Kuwait, the following incident is illustrative of its leaders’ position. In May 2005, on the eve of Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council Hasan Ruhani’s visit to the Arab Gulf states, Richard LeBaron, US ambassador to Kuwait, criticized Iran for its “appalling human rights record, its pursuit of nuclear weapons and WMDs, its interference with internal affairs of Iraq, its opposition to the Middle East peace process, and its sponsorship of terror.” He called on the GCC to take a firm stand against Iran’s nuclear ambitions and be more diplomatically active. The Kuwaiti speaker of parliament, Jasim al-Khurafi, quickly rebuked LeBaron for interfering with Kuwaiti relations with Iran and jeopardizing their bilateral relations. Kuwait’s highest officials preferred to keep silent to avoid provoking either the US or Iran.82
As for the UAE, in January 2006, President Sheikh Zayid gave a National Day address signaling the UAE’s desire to engage Iran diplomatically over the islands issue. But after the speech, he avoided making this issue a precondition for developing closer relations with Iran. Iran-UAE relations did expand in terms of trade, but not at the same rate as ties between Iran and other GCC states. The UAE also seemed less concerned about the possibility of a nuclear Iran than about the spreading of sectarian violence and Shi'i domination in Iraq. UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Muhammad al-Sha'ali accused the US of mishandling the security and political situation in Iraq in ways that contributed to the rise of these two threats.

The Saudis used stronger rhetoric; for instance, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal spoke in September 2005 to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, stating,

> The Iranians now go in this area that American forces have pacified and go into every government in Iraq, pay money and steal from their own people, [they] even establish[ed] their own police force for them with arms and militias and reinforce their presence in these areas. They are being protected by British and American forces in this area. …We fought a war together to prevent Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait [in 1991], now we are handing the whole country to Iran without reason.

Still, Saudi criticism was directed more against US responsibility for the situation in Iraq than against Iran’s regional policies.

More than other GCC states, Oman felt constrained vis-à-vis Iran, and also vis-à-vis the US, its main defender and supplier of arms. Oman’s geography, of course, meant that it was the gatekeeper of the Strait of Hormuz. As such, its leaders felt they were responsible to keep the Strait open and to prevent impediments to commercial traffic. Yet, they were not ready to confront Iran in any way. For Oman, the best policy was to continue its strategy of maintaining good trade relations with Iran.
The GCC states expressed concern regarding Iran’s role in Iraq while avoiding regional threats behind which Iran loomed. This seemed like the best way to prevent Iran from turning its wrath against the GCC. They were careful not to irk the US by involving Iran in an actual security arrangement as this would have been too much for the US to accept.

**GCC Responses to Iran’s Nuclear Development**

The GCC states sought first and foremost to avoid provoking Iran. Making a concerted effort to halt Iran’s nuclear development was secondary. They believed that if Western countries, such as those in Europe and the US, were unable to change stubborn Iranian attitudes over the development of nuclear energy, they would surely be unable to succeed. The alternative option, which the GCC rejected, would be their own entrance into the nuclear race and the pursuit of a weapons program to counter other regional nuclear threats. Hence, they preferred to turn a blind eye and make general statements about their desire for a peaceful region. For instance, GCC Secretary General Attiyah said in December 2005,

> We in the Gulf region are not worried about Iran’s nuclear program. It’s not worrisome as long as it’s restricted to peaceful use. We will be announcing very soon an agreement between GCC states, Iran and Iraq, and when it becomes stable, Yemen, to assure a Middle East region free of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. Our move is to further interact positively with the international community that fights against WMD proliferation.

With no sign of any direct pressure on Iran, in May 2006, Saud al-Faisal, addressing an American audience, stated in a conciliatory tone that the GCC leaders had decided to send an emissary to Iran to discuss nuclear development:

> Iran is looking for a leadership role in the region and one of the responsibilities of leadership is to work for security and stability in the region and not to cause instability by
adding a destabilizing issue like atomic weapons and proliferation in the region. We hope that we will have a hearing from the Iranians on this and they will join us in keeping the Middle East and the Gulf free of atomic weapons.\textsuperscript{88}

A week later, however, it was reported that Oman had backed out as the leader of this diplomatic mission to Iran, and its foreign minister said that Oman’s mission was actually only an idea that had been considered.\textsuperscript{89} This prompted the Qatari foreign minister to say, “There was no Gulf states initiative; it is more that we support and encourage a diplomatic solution to the issue.” In regard to Oman’s unwillingness to diplomatically confront Iran regarding its nuclear program, an American diplomat in Muscat observed that, because of geography, Oman was terrified of a possible US strike on Iran.\textsuperscript{90}

The desire to avoid provoking Iran generated a policy of ignoring the nuclear issue or downplaying it. Thus, in May 2006, the Saudis, along with the Russians, opposed the implementation of UN sanctions against Iran, urging the pursuit of more diplomatic options.\textsuperscript{91} When Iranian President Ahmadinejad visited Kuwait that month, Amir Ahmad al-Sabah told journalists that there was no reason to be concerned over Iran’s peaceful nuclear activities. Then, in July 2006, Qatar was the one member of the UN Security Council to vote against Resolution 1696 demanding that Iran suspend uranium enrichment by August of that year or face sanctions.\textsuperscript{92}

An additional possibility was that some of the GCC states, notably the strongest and biggest, Saudi Arabia, would want to develop their own nuclear capabilities. However, there were several considerations against this course of action. First, it would create an uncontrollable nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Second, Israel did not directly threaten Saudi Arabia with its potential nuclear capability, and the US was committed to defending Saudi Arabia from military threats including WMDs. Third, Iran itself had not sought to hurt the Gulf states or Saudi Arabia. Thus, the GCC states did not face enough pressure to insist on developing a nuclear posture. Yet, no one could be certain what would happen if the Saudis changed their minds.\textsuperscript{93}
The Saudis and the GCC states feared a war on Iran by Israel or the US, and GCC opposition to President Bush’s threats of military action against Iran was resolute. In the event of an American attack on Iran, Iran would almost certainly retaliate against US military bases in the Gulf, notably its air force headquarters in Qatar. Additionally, this could lead to both the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf. Either possibility would be economically devastating for the Gulf states.

In 2006, the US launched an initiative to create a coalition of Middle Eastern and Western states opposed to Iranian nuclear aspirations. The Bush administration urged the Gulf states to not only join, but also take a leading role in pressuring Iran to meet international demands. In a specifically GCC-oriented approach, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates pushed for the renewal of the Gulf Security Dialogue, the US’ main mechanism for security coordination with the GCC, to ensure regional stability and to confront Iran.

The US was not proposing a military initiative regarding Iran, but rather, Gates hoped to organize a coalition critical of Iran’s policies. Prince Bandar bin Sultan was an architect and strong supporter of this strategy; he worked closely with the US administration to help coordinate the policy, even meeting with Israeli cabinet minister Avi Dichter in Amman in September 2006 to bridge the gap between Israeli and Arab strategies towards Iran. But, rejecting the scheme as antagonistic to Iran, Saudi King Abdullah opted for a conciliatory approach. GCC states, not wanting to inflame Iran, did not pursue the American Gulf Security Dialogue. The Saudis also deliberately avoided criticizing Iran on its nuclear program, to avoid increasing tensions between the two states as much as possible. Even so, cooperation between Israel and pro-Western Arab states may have occurred clandestinely.

A breakthrough in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurred in March 2007, when Iranian President Ahmadinejad traveled to Riyadh to meet with Abdullah just before the Arab League Summit, which was held in the capital. This meeting signaled a desire to strengthen the relationship between the two regional powers and
prove to Tehran that Saudi Arabia was not an American proxy. It also
demonstrated that the Saudi ruler was ready to view the Iranian leader
as a partner in sharing and shaping spheres of influence in the Arab
world. Similar efforts were undertaken by other GCC states, notably
Oman and Qatar, which developed closer economic connections with
Iran.

Simultaneously, the GCC states publicly distanced themselves from
US attempts to draw them into an anti-Iranian coalition, prompting
Martin Indyk, a former Clinton administration high-ranking diplomat
in the Middle East, to conclude, “The honeymoon’s over for Bush and
the Saudis.”

During the inter-Arab summit of March 2007, King Abdullah declared the US occupation of Iraq illegal, reflecting the
Iranian position on the matter. The Saudi rejection of America's initiative was spearheaded by Abdullah against the urging of National
Security Advisor Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who remained opposed to
conciliation and favored joining the American coalition against Iran.

Furthermore, in December 2007, the GCC invited Ahmadinejad to the
2007 GCC summit in Doha as a display of friendship, showing Iran
that the Gulf states were not simply following the American lead.

Already by the end of George W. Bush’s second term a new approach
began to evolve in the US to meet the challenges of a nuclear Iran by
extending to the Gulf states an American security guarantee. The
GCC states would not be forced to relinquish their calculated
avoidance of engaging Iran over its nuclear issue by joining a US-led
anti-Iran coalition. The idea developed in August 2008, when a large-
scale arms deal was offered to the GCC states in the amount of $20
billion. This sum was subsequently raised to an estimated $100 billion
over the next five years as states like Iraq and Egypt also indicated an
interest in military procurement. At the core of this deal was a new
generation of military jets, advanced radar, and AWACS systems, and
the latest in air defense and anti-ballistic missile systems.

Since the inauguration of President Barack Obama in January 2009,
the US has softened its stance on Iranian nuclear development
(although US support for new UN sanctions in June 2010 indicates a
shift back to a more aggressive approach). Proposals by the
international community include exchanging slightly enriched Iranian
uranium for processed fuel rods for use in Iranian reactors. Additionally, Obama’s calls for dialogue with Tehran over these and other issues have drawn public praise from the GCC, notably from Secretary General Attiyah, as being constructive and far less destabilizing than the statements made by previous American administrations (i.e., George Bush).  

This has brought US policy in closer alignment with GCC interests; however, President Obama has not ruled out the possibility of a military strike as long as Iranian intransigence continues.

In July 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the prospect of a US defense umbrella for its allies in the Middle East if Iran continued to pursue nuclear weapons. Clinton added that this option did not represent any change in official US policy aimed at preventing Iranian nuclear development and was careful not to officially mention the term “nuclear umbrella.” Analysts indicated that the advantages of such a plan would be to prevent local states from pursuing the development of their own nuclear weapons, and therefore, prevent a nuclear arms race in the region. Japan, South Korea, and Australia are all exemplified by this strategy. No official response was given by Saudi Arabia or any of the other Gulf states to the umbrella proposal. However, Egypt, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, publicly rejected the proposal, claiming that this type of foreign alliance would create unwanted and unnecessary tension in the Middle East. Furthermore, this suggestion led to harsh Israeli accusations that the US had accepted the inevitability of a nuclear Iran and was further arming Israel’s regional rivals. GCC leaders might have tacitly and at least partially accepted the nuclear orbit, but they remained non-confrontational towards Iran over this issue.

Confronting Iranian Influence in the Middle East

Despite distancing themselves from US policies in 2006-2007, the Saudis maintained their tough position on Iranian interference in Arab politics, signaling that Riyadh was seeking to use diplomatic initiatives both to contain Iranian influence and to increase its own in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories. In the beginning of 2007, Saudi Arabia inserted itself in the middle of two major regional conflicts (in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories) that could be
described as confrontations between a moderate camp supported by the West (March 14 coalition and Fatah) and a radical, Iranian-supported camp (Hizballah and Hamas). This Saudi intervention was meant to achieve a compromise that would prevent continued armed conflict and support an Arab consensus and a return to stability. For the GCC states, a compromise represented the best-case scenario, as Iran’s clients, Hizballah and Hamas, had both a military advantage and a higher level of popular Arab support than the increasingly unpopular and dysfunctional Palestinian Fatah and Lebanese “March 14” groups, whose Western support undermined their positions at home. The Saudis further intervened in these two diplomatic conflicts in order to roll back Iranian influence and prevent the emergence of an Iranian-led axis in the Middle East.

In 2006, the Iranian proxy Shi’i Hizballah and its allies in the opposition launched a campaign of strikes that quickly turned violent to protest their marginalization in the political process dominated by the pro-Western March 14 coalition. The opposition blocked roads and set fires, demanding greater participation in the governance of Lebanon, notably the ability to exercise veto power in the cabinet. The Sunni-led bloc responded with its own counter-demonstrations, bringing political life in Lebanon to a screeching halt in an escalation of the ongoing conflict between Hizballah and its allies, and the Sunni-dominated government. Tensions further intensified in early 2008 when Hizballah forces attacked and took control of western Beirut, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. While Hizballah denied working towards an Iranian, or joint Iranian-Syrian agenda, many in Lebanon and abroad perceived the move to have been directly instigated by Iran. In this conflict, Saudi Arabia and Iran found themselves patrons of opposing camps, with the possibility of being drawn into the conflict.

The Saudis had good reason to fear rising sectarian tensions in Lebanon, as 2006-2007 marked the height of sectarian violence in neighboring Iraq, which could potentially spill over. Saudi leaders were keen to avoid an outbreak of violence not only within their borders, but anywhere in the Middle East. They knew that it was vital to cooperate with Iranian and Syrian agents in Lebanon in an attempt to coordinate rivals’ policies and avoid sectarian civil war. As well,
Hizballah’s ability to kindle a war in the region, as had occurred in
the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, worried the GCC
states. Therefore, even while the US continued its strict refusal to
engage Iran in any sort of dialogue, the Saudis began negotiating
directly with the Iranian government, which had the ability to ensure
the compliance of Hizballah in order to break the political stalemate
that had paralyzed Lebanese politics. In October 2006, Saudi National
Security Advisor Sultan met with Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani in
order to reach a compromise between Hizballah and the March 14
coalition, and eventually Saudi King Abdullah engaged directly with
Iranian President Ahmadinejad.105 The Saudi ambassador to Beirut,
Abd al-Aziz Khuja, was also active in negotiations with Hizballah
and mediation between the government and the opposition.106

Despite Hizballah’s claims that it supported Saudi mediation, Saudi
leverage did not succeed in drawing Hizballah into consensus with the
Lebanese government. One explanation for this failure is the close
alliance that existed between Saudi leaders and the leader of the
March 14 coalition, Sa’ad Hariri, son of the late former Prime
Minister Rafiq Hariri.107 Further contributing to tensions within
Lebanon was the public falling out between Saudi Arabia and Syria
that began after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, and it is
possible that Hizballah’s refusal to support Saudi mediation attempts
was linked to its support for Syria against Saudi criticism. It was the
small state of Qatar that managed to break the deadlock in May 2008,
when leaders from both factions met under Qatari auspices in Doha
and negotiated the Doha Agreement, a power-sharing deal that gave
veto power to the Hizballah-led opposition.108 This veto power was a
setback for pro-Western interests in the Middle East. However, the
Saudis accepted this compromise in the hope that it would stabilize
Lebanese politics.

Despite the outcome of successful elections in Lebanon in the
summer of 2009, which resulted in a victory for the coalition led by
Hariri’s son, Sa’ad, deadlock between the two factions remained over
the conditions of the creation of a national unity government, which
had been the basis of the Doha Agreement. While negotiations
between Saudi Arabia and Iran proceeded, there was a gradual
recognition that rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Syria, the

41
two most influential Arab powers in Lebanon, would be necessary to break the deadlock and forge a stable government there. This was a major factor leading to the October 2009 summit in Damascus between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Saudi King Abdullah, who was visiting Syria for the first time since becoming king in 2005. This move was greeted with relief by politicians in Lebanon, especially Prime Minister Designate Sa‘ad Hariri. Rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia has gone a long way toward stabilizing Lebanon; however, Iranian influence should not be underrated. The relationship between Hizballah and Iran, for the time being, remains unshakable, and Hizballah will undoubtedly continue to look to Tehran as well as Damascus for political and military support.

In the case of the Palestinians, Western and certain Arab attempts to isolate Hamas after its January 2006 electoral victory led to violent factionalism that threatened to deteriorate into civil war. King Abdullah hoped that a national unity agreement between Fatah and Hamas could help restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, whose successful completion could reinforce the Arab position against Iran. The Saudis recognized the need for a diplomatic resolution to a conflict that had the potential to draw the region into a broader war and was disruptive to the Arab attempt to contain Iran. Thus, Saudi leaders invited representatives of both factions to Mecca. The Saudi-brokered Mecca agreement between Hamas and Fatah, signed in February 2007, provided a blueprint for a Palestinian national unity government and attempted to thwart Iranian attempts to crush the Arab-Israeli peace process by supporting militant, anti-Israeli groups. Saudi leaders also pledged three-quarters of a billion dollars in aid to the new government, which was significantly more than Iran had provided to Hamas, thus giving Hamas the financial incentive to support the Arab consensus instead of Iran. Along the same lines, King Abdullah reintroduced the 2002 Arab peace initiative at the March 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh and linked the intra-Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian negotiating tracks. Accordingly, after Israel were to withdraw from all the territories occupied in 1967 and a Palestinian state was established, the Arab states would normalize their relations with Israel. At the summit, Arab leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the deal, and Egypt and
Jordan, the states at peace with Israel, agreed to attempt to convince Israeli leaders to accept the offer.

However, Saudi efforts were quickly overturned as Hamas abrogated the agreement and took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, leading to a Western-imposed blockade of Gaza and the eventual renewal of rocket fire to Israeli civilian populations. This situation came to a head at the end of December 2008, when Israel launched a military campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which resulted in widespread destruction of Gazan infrastructure and around 1,400 Palestinian casualties. While not supporting Israel during the campaign, Saudi Arabia and Egypt refrained from backing Hamas. Instead, they bolstered the position of Palestinian Authority President and Fatah Chairman Mahmud Abbas by calling for the end of hostilities and reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, while refusing to pressure the international community to force a ceasefire. Saudi Arabia and Egypt's silence over US support for the Israeli operation made the two countries an open target for accusations of collusion between conservative Arabs states and Israel, especially from Iran and Syria.111

The "conference wars" that followed were directly related to perceptions of support given by other Arab states to Hamas, as was evident in the rival conferences of January 2009 in Doha and Kuwait. The emergency conference in Doha, on January 13, was called by Qatari leaders in an attempt to bring together the Arab parties and Iran in order to reach an agreement that would end the inter-Palestinian deadlock and craft a united Arab position on the conflict. Representatives from both Iran and Hamas were invited to Doha, but Egyptian, Saudi, and Fatah leaders – perceived as the pro-Western parties – boycotted the proceedings and leveled criticism at Qatar for colluding with Iran.112 While Egypt and Saudi Arabia were able to prevent an official quorum at the Doha meeting, over half of the Arab League member states were represented. Non-Arab League states, such as Turkey, Israel’s closest Muslim ally, as well as Iran, which was represented by President Ahmadinejad, sent observers to the conference.
Additionally, some states decided to boycott the Doha conference due to domestic considerations, notably the UAE, which initially accepted the invitation, but later reversed its decision when it discovered that Iran would be represented at the highest levels. Iraq also declined the invitation to Doha, as its condition for attendance was an official quorum of 16 Arab League member states not including itself. Finally, Palestinian Authority President Abbas, who was actually the first to accept Qatar’s invitation to Doha, pulled out at the last moment due to external pressure. In fact, until Abbas’ sudden reversal, the PA was the only Palestinian faction invited to attend the Doha summit, and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jasm al-Thani stated, “We are committed not to bring in Hamas or other Palestinian factions in order not to give [Abbas] an excuse not to come.” Only after Abbas’ rejection of the invitation were other Palestinian factions invited.

The first stated conclusion of the Doha summit was that the agreed-upon issues would be presented at the upcoming summit in “sisterly Kuwait,” reflecting an attempt to minimize tensions among rival Arab parties. The Doha statement denounced Israel’s use of force and hailed Hamas’ stance. Nothing was officially said regarding Iran, nor were there any harsh words for states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, though there was an atmosphere of criticism towards them for not being sufficiently supportive. The final conclusions called upon Israel to cease its aggression against the Palestinians and urged all states to aid in rebuilding Gaza. Qatar, Mauritania and Turkey, all states that maintain trade and political relations with Israel, supported the resolution.

The GCC states were able to retain Western cooperation entering the Arab League Economic Summit, which was held on January 19, 2009, in Kuwait and was considered by Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, to be the official summit, where Iran and Hamas – neither of which were members of the Arab League – would not be represented. Before the summit, Saudi King Abdullah convened an emergency meeting of GCC leaders, in which there was full attendance, reflecting the overriding GCC desire to maintain a common-minded approach with respect to strategic issues facing its member states. At the Kuwait conference, the Saudis emphasized the
Arab Peace Initiative, namely their older mediation initiative aimed at containing Iran's ambitions. Thus, the "conference war" between Doha and Kuwait in January 2009 was not, as some suggested, only a conflict between a pro-Iranian axis meeting in Doha and a pro-Western axis meeting in Kuwait, but also a disagreement over who should lead mediation efforts and how they should be undertaken.

Saudi Arabia, while the largest and most powerful state in the Gulf, has, in many cases, reached the limits of its ability to assume the role of coordinator in inter-Arab politics due to its close relationship with the US and its incapacity to mediate the crises between the Palestinian factions and in Lebanon. Mediation has fallen to a fellow GCC member, Qatar, to fill this vacuum. Qatar, while continuing to host American forces, and having, until January 2009, maintained diplomatic relations with Israel (which Qatar severed in response to the war in Gaza), has also developed close relations with Iran and its clients and has proven to be a more acceptable mediator to Iranian proxies such as Hizballah and Hamas. In a number of cases, notably in Lebanon, it was the Qataris, not the Saudis, who successfully broke the stalemate. Ironically, while the outcome was what the Saudis hoped for, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt have resented the Qataris because they feel that the small Emirate's success has undermined their value as stabilizers and mediators in the eyes of the US, and have labored to cast Qatar as an ally of Iran (especially Egypt, as Qatar is also mediating the crisis in Darfur, Sudan, practically in Egypt's backyard). Thus, while GCC members labor to bring stability to the Middle East, their efforts have been characterized by competitiveness and camp-building.

In the Arab-Israeli sphere, disagreements have emerged between the GCC and Washington regarding appropriate steps towards restarting negotiations. Since June 2009, President Obama has attempted to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and has called on Israel to suspend settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's response, in his June 2009 speech at Bar-Ilan University, was a verbal recognition of a two-state solution, coupled with a refusal to halt construction.
In the summer and fall of 2009, Washington exerted pressure on Saudi leaders to alter King Abdullah’s Arab Peace Initiative and offer Israel a number of concessions, including commercial over-flight rights and renewed diplomatic contacts, hoping that these steps would accelerate the resumption of peace negotiations, but these requests were denied. While the Obama administration has hoped that Arab gestures would help convince Netanyahu to cease construction and restart negotiations, Arab leaders, especially in Saudi Arabia, have countered by declaring that no concessions would be made rewarding Israel for its continued construction of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories and East Jerusalem. Saudi leaders have even tried to convince their regional allies and partners to refrain from agreeing to US requests. The Saudi position continues to be that it has already made a grand gesture to Israel in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative and that it is Israel’s turn to reciprocate. The Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, has bluntly rejected requests by the Americans to make gestures to Israel until the fulfillment of the conditions outlined in the 2002 initiative.

The link between Iranian ascendancy and the Arab-Israeli conflict is quite concrete in the minds of GCC leaders. In August 2009, however, a number of GCC members bowed to American pressure and declared they would be renewing their limited contacts with Israel, including the UAE, Oman, and perhaps most critically, Qatar. Qatar, who was accused of a pro-Iranian, pro-Hamas bias in the first half of 2009, dispelled these assertions by agreeing to reestablish relations with Israel. Nonetheless, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s praise for Netanyahu’s promise to restrain settlement activity in November 2009 was met with widespread condemnation throughout the Arab world and has led to a growing perception that the US has acquiesced to Israeli demands. GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, have perceived a decline in their influence and standing in the Arab world as a consequence of America’s failure to elicit a change in behavior from the Israeli government. Other Arab states and organizations have demanded the suspension of the Arab Peace Initiative. This has led Iran to become more assertive of its view regarding Israel and has garnered support for organizations such as Hamas and Hizballah.
The Saudis have accused Iran of supporting a Shi'i uprising on its border with Yemen, further destabilizing the region.\textsuperscript{121} Saudi leaders see reestablishing Arab unity and improving ties with Syria as their primary means of regaining prestige and advancing their own interests. Syria is a primary target for Saudi diplomacy due to the close ties between Tehran and Damascus, and recent attempts at rapprochement between the two states reflect this notion.

As of April 2010, a new conflict is beginning to emerge in Saudi Arabia’s backyard as renewed fighting between Shi'i Huthi rebels in North Yemen, believed to be supported by Iran and the Yemeni and Saudi governments escalates. While this conflict is not new, direct Iranian involvement, including weapons shipments, casts this small-scale conflict as yet another arena where Iran can establish its regional influence and challenge the Sunni hegemony.\textsuperscript{122}
CONCLUSION

The GCC states' security strategy, shaped during the 1990s, combined diplomatic tactics and reliance on US defenses in a set of improvised arrangements that lacked clear guidelines. This approach barely sufficed to meet the challenges of those days and was not suitable to meet the new strategic threats and challenges that emerged after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. This invasion and the consequent Iranian ascendancy in the region following Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 constituted a new era of threats facing the GCC – that of a rising Iran unrestrained by Iraq, whose own threat had changed from military menace to a chaotic melting pot of sub-state sectarian (Shi'i versus Sunni) and transnational (al-Qaida) violence. While one cluster of problems emanated from the situation in Iraq and the other from the growing regional influence and nuclear ambitions of Iran, both threats were new for the Gulf states.

The GCC states had difficulties formulating a new, coordinated strategy that would suit these changing dynamics. Sometimes they were too bogged down in old security concepts and threat perceptions to be able to address new ones, and other times they did not fully recognize the magnitude of the emerging threats. In some cases, GCC states had differing perceptions of specific threats. For example, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia continued to fear Iraq and threats emanating from the situation there, such as sectarianism or the Shi'i domination of the Iraqi government. The UAE continued to fear Iranian aggression in the Gulf and even allowed its preoccupation to drive certain decisions, such as its refusal to attend the Doha conference in January 2009. GCC states also avoided affirmative decisions that would bring them into confrontation with Iran. As such, the US was unable to entice them into joining an anti-Iranian coalition to oppose nuclear development or officially agreeing to a defensive nuclear umbrella, which could be construed as a hostile alliance with Washington against Iran. The GCC states preferred to avoid these issues altogether, evidently not wanting to irk either the US or Iran. When they did address the nuclear issue, they did so via general declarations in support of a nuclear-free Middle East, more a criticism of Israel than of Iran.
Regarding Iraq, the GCC states clearly failed to devise a comprehensive strategy to help stabilize Iraq, advance reconciliation between warring factions, or establish ties with the new Iraqi government. Most of the GCC states remained passive toward Iraq, preferring to focus on stemming violence in their own states rather than work in Iraq to prevent the flow of fighters, funds, and radical ideas from crossing into their territories. It seems that GCC states resorted to relying on existing US military dominance in Iraq as the main pillar of their strategy. GCC states therefore relied on the US' continued strength and, through Saudi prompting, pressured the US to reinforce its presence in Iraq in 2007, which became known as the "surge." While this increase in military presence in Iraq led to a decline in violence, and Shi'i terrorism did not spill over into the GCC states, the situation in Iraq remained unstable.

US policies did not make it easier for GCC states to confront these challenges. During the period of 2005-2006, the US hardly demonstrated an effective policy for dealing with Iran's growing threat, or for changing the GCC states' attitude towards Iraq by bringing quiet to the country. The US was focused on comprehending the new problem of Iran and was, in a way, bogged down in its entanglement in Iraq. US forces in Iraq were fighting both the Shi'i Mahdists and the Sunni elements close to al-Qaida, but they did not consider the GCC states' fear of sectarian war spreading to the Gulf. America's attention was at the same time focused on other regional security problems such as Afghanistan and al-Qaida's activities in Saudi Arabia. Washington’s lack of interest in the Gulf essentially left a vacuum.

Regarding Iran, the GCC states resorted to their time-honored diplomatic tactic of multi-balancing, which was readapted to the conditions of the post-2005 situation in the Middle East. This strategy ignored the nuclear issue, as it did not pose a direct threat to the GCC states, and resisted the association with a coalition opposed to Iranian policies. Within the Saudi-initiated regional plan, the GCC states attempted to coordinate a regional balance of influence-sharing with Iran in order to stabilize the region. They pursued this goal in direct cooperation with Iranian officials, but at the same time, attempted to contain and even reduce Iranian influence in regional arenas.
consumed by conflict, notably in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The power-sharing agreement in Lebanon relatively stabilized the country and paved the way for peaceful elections in 2009 that rewarded the conservatives with a pro-Western majority and the appointment of Sa'ad Hariri as prime minister. However, this has not led to an end of tensions between Hizballah and Israel, and Iranian influence over Hizballah has remained strong. The Mecca agreement failed to pacify the conflict between Hamas and Fatah, and relations between Palestinians and Israelis have degraded further. This has remained the case since the inauguration of US President Obama, despite the early optimism in a change of US attitudes towards Arab-Israeli negotiations, and GCC states have refused calls by Obama and Secretary Clinton to make gestures toward Israel.

While in the 1980s, the GCC states often felt caught between Iraq and Iran, and in the 1990s often felt caught between Iraq and the US, after 2003 the dilemma of the GCC has been their position between the US and Iran, as well as their position between their national interest in supporting the US effort in Iraq and the opposition of their citizens to the occupation. In both cases, the Gulf rulers’ association with the US is a major problem, undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of various Arab publics and fuelling support for radical Islamist opposition to the states as well as strengthening Iran’s suspicions of a hostile US-GCC coalition. Yet, reliance on the US has become the GCC’s only valid security tactic against foreign military threats. The GCC is not ready to give up this reliance on the US; however, in response to other threats, such as internal terrorism, infiltration of sectarian violence from Iraq, or Iran’s regional ambitions, the GCC states have continued to rely on regional diplomatic maneuvers and on their own ability to fight terrorism.

In 2010, the GCC states are still in a precarious position. While violence in Iraq appears to be slowly declining, President Obama has pledged a troop withdrawal in the coming years, which will create a vacuum in Iraq that has the potential to be filled by a number of powers. This includes Iran or Iraqi Shi'i forces that could prove hostile to the Sunni Gulf states, radical Islamist militants who could threaten conservative Gulf monarchies, or the GCC states themselves, if they can agree on a strategy to stabilize the state and increase Sunni
influence. As for Iran, the nuclear program has shown no signs of abating and US attempts to foster dialogue are on the verge of failure. Israel continues to prepare for a possible war against Iran. No progress has been made in the Israeli-Palestinian arena or in Hamas-Fatah reconciliation. Tensions between Hizballah and Israel have continued, and the Obama administration has been seemingly unable to lower these tensions. Moreover, support for the Saudi peace initiative is waning among Arab leaders. Thus, despite GCC states’ repeated attempts at mediation, they have failed to contain the threats posed by the post-2003 regional conditions.
Notes


4. On recent oil income, see The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) quarterly publications on each of the Gulf states.


10. On Iran’s policies toward the Arab Gulf states during this period, see H. Fuertig, Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars, Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002.

11. Teitelbaum, “The End of Dual Containment.”


13. GSN, 17 April 2000.


18 See interview with GCC Secretary-General Abdullah Khujaylan, Al-Majallah, 21 November 1999; Al-Hayat, 6 October 2000.
27 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 G. Bahgat, “SAudi Arabia and the War on Terrorism,” pp. 53-6.
36 Ibid; See also Karmon and Kazimi, “A Virulent Ideology…”
http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/IraqReport06.2.pdf
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35 Draft by A. Cordesman and N. Obaid, “Al-Qaida.”
(accessed 21 June 2010).
48 D. Zimmerman, “Calibrating Disorder.”
GCC STATES AND SECURITY CHALLENGES


55 “Saudi Minister Says Agreement Near on Border Wall with Iraq,” Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 7 July 2008; see also “Saudi Arabia Soon to Assign Company to Construct Wall along Border with Iraq,” Saudi Gazette, 7 July 2008.


57 Al-Ra’y al-Am (Kuwait), 9 January 2004.


63 O. Hasan, “Kuwaiti MPs Urge Recall of Ambassador from Iraq,” Agence France Presse, 2 June 2009.


71 Gause, “Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran...”


73 Cordesman, Gulf Military Forces, p. 17.

74 See reports by the Iranian News Agency (IRNA), 17 May 2005; 9 May 2006.
76 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
92 UN Security Council, 31 July 2006. Online. Available HTTP:  
99 “The Statements of Hamad bin Jasim bin Jabir Al Thani, Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs,” (The Conclusion of the 28th GCC Supreme Council Summit in Doha), Qatar News Agency, 4 December 2007.
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108 “Lebanese, Arab Officials React to Doha Agreement, Praise Qatari Role,” BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, 22 May 2008.


Ibid.


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