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THE IRAQ-IRAN WAR AND
THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

by

John Duke Anthony

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The recent attacks on oil tankers and other vessels by Iraq and Iran, following the earlier bombing of American and other installations in Kuwait by terrorists, are stark reminders of the great dangers facing U.S. interests in the Arabian Gulf. But before clamors mount for the intervention of American troops, elementary wisdom suggests that one look first to a small silver lining among the storm clouds in this otherwise war-torn region. At a time when our military and economic resources abroad are thinly stretched, it is heartening to see the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states making realistic and responsible plans for their own defense.

In the wake of heightened threats to freedom of navigation in this, the world's most strategic waterway, the GCC's Ministerial Council recently convened in Riyadh. With the Iran-Iraq conflict raging only twenty minutes away by air from Arabia's borders, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman weighed what steps they might take on their own to enhance the prospects for regional security cooperation. In the interim, the ministers were hopeful that two particular measures taken by Saudi Arabia might continue to serve as deterrents. These were the utilization of (1) the Kingdom's American-supplied AWACS to monitor the Gulf's airspace, and (2) U.S.-supplied F15 fighter planes to resist violations of Saudi Arabian territory.

The ministers focused on a tough agenda:

- ° finding a non-military, preferably diplomatic, way to end the bloody Iran-Iraq war, which has already cost well over 100,000 lives and over \$35 billion in GCC aid to Iraq;
- ° maintaining freedom of navigation in the Gulf, on which not only the GCC's economies depend, but also those of the U.S. and its allies; and,
- ° strengthening security within the GCC.

Following an extended period of Iraqi threats to continue bombing vessels entering Iranian oil export terminals and Iranian counter-threats to close the Gulf to all shipping, more than sixty ships are currently lined up outside the Straits of Hormuz, preferring to be less of a target while waiting to load half of Europe's and two-thirds of Japan's oil imports. As yet another regional conflict shows potential for exploding with serious repercussions for the whole world, the U.S. and other oil importing nations can derive some comfort from what the GCC has been doing at the regional, intra-regional and local level to enhance self-reliance.

Foremost on the GCC agenda since its establishment on May 25, 1981 has been the need to deter a military attack by Iranian forces or any widening of the Gulf war which could lead to American or other outside intervention. As they gaze across the Gulf at over a quarter of a million men under arms in both Iran and Iraq, an overriding question for GCC military planners remains: how might the sparsely populated desert states set about to forge a credible deterrence, let alone manage their defense?

As a first step, the GCC has conducted a series of joint military maneuvers over the past eight months. To be sure, the number of combat-readied troops involved thus far -- less than 15,000 -- is miniscule by American standards. It is for a different reason, however, that the exercises, to date, have been significant: they represent the first joint maneuvers ever held between Arab states. Rather than seeking to make a show of force, the purpose of the exercises has been to test the coordination of the six states' Western equipment and command systems, especially in air defense, radar, and communications.

Although what has been taking place is unprecedented, many outside observers, American analysts among them, have failed to notice the importance of the maneuvers insofar as U.S. national security interests are concerned. Viewed for what they are -- demonstrations to the world that aggression against any one of the six states will be an aggression against all -- the exercises are a symbolic illustration of the GCC states' determination to have military oneness. In local eyes, they signify that the GCC is on the right track to diminish both the needs and pretexts for outside intervention.

Coming at a time of simultaneous U.S. concern over developments in Central America, the U.S. and other Western countries have every reason to welcome and encourage what the GCC is trying to accomplish. At stake in the outcome is the security of six states which, together, generate nearly half of all OPEC oil production and contain 40% of the world's proven oil reserves. No less important to the American taxpayer is the fact that they have invested more extensively in U.S. Treasury bills than any other regional group, which in its own way

has helped to hold down interest rates and finance the American national debt.

Yet despite the high profile of U.S. interests in the region, and the preference by a majority within the GCC for American goods and technology, increasing amounts of equipment being purchased by the member states are of French and British origin. The recent decision by Saudi Arabia to purchase a \$2 billion French-built air defense system is a painful case in point. In the eyes of many GCC military planners, the U.S., by contrast, is considered an unreliable arsenal due to the "no arms for most Arabs" campaign waged in the Congress.

The huge flow of American military, monetary, diplomatic and strategic support for Israel hardly helps matters. On the contrary, it constitutes a major disincentive to any public embrace of the U.S. in most GCC states. A contemporary irony flows from this. It is that the prospects for providing truly meaningful and sustained U.S. assistance for local defense efforts are curtailed in a region where American strategic, economic, and security interests are more obvious and vital than almost any place in the world.

All this would be of far less importance were it not for the fact that the military and security concerns of the GCC states are real, as recent events have demonstrated. Making it no less important is another option being considered in Washington and Europe in the event that regional, intra-regional and local self-defense efforts prove ineffective: the intervention by Western, primarily American, forces in the region. Yet in the event that consid-

eration of the latter option grows in popularity, it is legitimate to ask: where would these troops come from?

The principal military organization responsible for protecting American security interests in the Gulf is the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida. Only in theory, however, does CENTCOM have the necessary forces to back up its heady mandate. In the event of a crisis in the Gulf requiring prolonged U.S. intervention, American soldiers would have to be borrowed from locations scattered around the world, with the attendant risk of bringing force levels in Europe and elsewhere to unacceptably low levels.

The costs, moreover, would not be limited to American manpower. Top U.S. military and civilian officials admit that creating a capacity for effective American intervention in the Gulf will require tens of billions of dollars for improved sea and airlift capabilities and new light-armored divisions. Yet whether taxpayer expenditures of this magnitude would be possible or, more importantly, are really necessary have hardly been the subject of serious discussion and debate within the Congress. All of which is puzzling, especially as the states in question are among the world's very few which are able and willing to pay their own defense bills and to do so up front in cash.

Assistance in the strengthening of indigenous defense forces among the GCC states would, in short, cost the U.S. taxpayer nothing. Yet, the strategic, economic, political, and diplomatic gains -- not to mention the dozens of corporate contracts and many thousands of

jobs that will otherwise go to Europeans -- would be considerable. Most importantly, such assistance would lessen substantially the likelihood that American soldiers might one day have to intervene to defend U.S. or other Western interests in the region.

The inclination of many in the Reagan Administration to downplay local initiatives in international crisis areas and to use armed intervention when U.S. interests appear even indirectly or potentially threatened does not bode well for what is at stake for Americans in the Gulf. In this light the GCC's efforts to reduce the causes -- whether needs or pretexts -- of superpower intervention warrant our support and encouragement. Neither the process nor the outcome -- enhanced potential for self-defense -- poses the slightest threat to Israel, Iraq, Iran or anyone else. This is clearly in keeping with America's national interests.

JOHN DUKE ANTHONY, President of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations in Washington, D.C., writes frequently on the politics of the Gulf states.

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