

BETWIXT WAR AND PEACE: THE 12TH GCC HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT

by

John Duke Anthony

Winter 1992

## BETWIXT WAR AND PEACE: THE 12TH GCC HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT

by

John Duke Anthony

Most Western media reports provide little more than sketchy accounts of the annual GCC Heads of State summit. In general, the accounts imply that the GCC is of marginal significance in regional and world affairs. The most recent summit, held in Kuwait this past December, was no exception in this regard.

Most of the press coverage focused only on a proposal to strengthen and expand the GCC's small joint defense force. Because the summiters decided to defer the proposal for further study, the media judged the meeting a failure. However, in so doing, reporters ignored numerous important issues that were addressed and several areas in which progress was achieved. This report is based on my having attended the summit as an observer and it focuses on what most commentators either overlooked or downplayed regarding the meeting's agenda and its results.

The summit addressed five broad categories of GCC interests and concerns: (1) Iraq, (2) intra-GCC affairs, (3) the "GCC plus two", i.e., the six GCC states plus Egypt and Syria, (4) Iran, and (5) the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. To be sure, defense-related matters were discussed in each of these categories, but geopolitical, diplomatic, and economic considerations were also noteworthy.

### **Iraq**

The summiters dealt with Iraq both in general terms and with particular regard to Kuwait's concerns. The most prominent among the latter were: (a) repatriation of the many Kuwaiti hostages in Iraq; (b) compensation to Kuwait and other victims of Iraq's aggression; (c) demarcation of the Kuwait-Iraq boundary; and (d) full implementation of the UN Security Council Resolutions pertaining to Iraq.

Some Western observers were surprised and disappointed that the summiters were not supportive of the rebellions among Iraq's Kurdish minority in the north or its Shia population in the south. However, the GCC has been consistently committed to the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of another country and to perpetuation of the regional status quo with respect to the Gulf countries' national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity.

The GCC had supported these principles throughout the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. The member states responded neither to Iran's insistence on "liberating" the Shia shrines of Karbala and Najaf from Baghdad's control nor to Baghdad's fueling of secessionist aspirations among the Arab population of Iran's southwestern province of Khuzistan.

Regarding the Kurds, GCC strategists argue that an independent Kurdistan carved from Iraqi territory would almost certainly presage similar quests by Kurds in Iran and Turkey. GCC leaders recognize that such a situation would portend far greater bloodshed and even more regional instability than has already occurred. Noting that Turkey's Kurdish population of 12 million is three times that of Iraq's and Iran's, the GCC is keen to see the territorial integrity of Iraq and Iran maintained.

### **Intra-GCC Relations**

The summiters spent much time discussing how best to prevent a recurrence of the invasion that occurred the year previously. At the GCC's December 1990

summit in Doha, Qatar, Oman's Sultan Qaboos had been appointed chairman of a GCC Supreme Council on Security tasked with suggesting ways to enhance the member states' collective deterrence and defense.

At the Kuwait summit, Oman recommended that the GCC's modest 10,000 man joint force at Hafr Al-Batin in Saudi Arabia be expanded to 100,000 troops and that the force's command be rotated among the member countries. Oman's rationale for the proposed ten-fold increase in the force's size: an army equivalent in numbers to the much-touted Iraqi Republican Guard. Oman believed that a rotating command would enhance the level of commitment among the member countries and underscore, politically and symbolically, the collective security aspects of their respective defense efforts.

The summiters voiced only modest support for the Omani proposal and recommended its further study. The reasons embraced a range of opinions expressed primarily by the GCC's three northernmost countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

Although Bahraini leaders voiced continued support for the GCC's joint force, they reasoned that even a significantly expanded force would be unlikely by itself to constitute a sufficient deterrent against any future threat from either Iran or Iraq, both of which have much larger populations and armed forces. Its strategists contended accordingly that a more credible framework for the GCC's deterrence and defense for the foreseeable future would be to complement the joint force by an intimate defense arrangement with the Allied Coalition countries.

Kuwait agrees with Bahrain, but arrives at its position from a different perspective. From the time of its independence in 1961 until the Iraqi invasion in 1990, Kuwait had supported the principle of seeking intra-Arab solutions to intra-Arab disputes. Kuwait's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, however, have been threatened three times since its independence: in 1961, when the regime of Abd Al-Karim Qasim mobilized Iraqi armed forces in support of Iraq's claims to Kuwait; in 1986, when Iran sought to shut down Kuwait's oil shipments by attacking its oil tankers; and in 1990, when Iraq invaded. In each instance, it was not so much Arab or Islamic, as Western, forces that countered the threat.

For Kuwait, the effect of these lessons has been to jettison its previous hope that inter-Arab, pan-Arab, or pan-Islamic efforts might be relied upon to resolve territorial disputes. Kuwaiti officials now believe that only a combination of its own substantially strengthened defense forces and the superior capabilities of Western, and primarily American, arms and political support are likely to protect it from future aggression. These officials agree that a pan-GCC force will continue to have important strategic and symbolic significance. However, regardless of its size, equipment, defense systems, and overall effectiveness, such a force by itself could not substitute for an unambiguous commitment by the Allied Coalition countries to Kuwait's, and the GCC countries', defense.

Saudi Arabia was also reluctant to endorse the Omani proposal. Riyadh's priority is to increase the size, equipment, and overall effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's own armed forces first. Although this, in itself, would take years, the Kingdom believes this approach to be more sound than augmenting a pan-GCC force aimed at deterring Baghdad, Tehran, or any other potential aggressor.

Individual Saudis acknowledge that a 100,000-man GCC force would mean numerical parity with Iraq's Republican Guard as presently constituted. However, they reason that by the time such a GCC force were created, the nature of the threat would probably be different. In addition, the size and composition of Iraq's force, not to mention Iran's, would likely be larger and different from their current makeup. Such calculations render dubious the likelihood of attaining parity.

Germany's and Japan's lengthy recovery from their defeat in World War Two is not very instructive. As oil-producers, both Iran and Iraq have the potential to bounce back much faster than either Germany or Japan had. Neither Iran nor Iraq needs to restore its industrial infrastructure in order to acquire arms. Once the sanctions are lifted, Iraq will be able to, and Iran already can, buy or barter oil for weapons from a host of willing suppliers. From this perspective, Saudi Arabia is keen to increase its own armed forces from 70,000 to 140,000. The effort involved in meeting this ambitious objective will preclude the Kingdom's simultaneous commitment to a ten-fold expansion of the GCC force.

Beyond the reservations of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, the summiters also deemed it prudent to weigh Iran's favorable reaction to Oman's proposal. This was in itself grounds for hesitation in the eyes of the many GCC leaders who believe that the greater long-term threat to the GCC is not Iraq but Iran. Iranian observers at the summit noted that if the proposal were adopted, the rationale for individual GCC countries' signing defense agreements with the U.S., Great Britain, and other Western powers would be negated. It is self-evident that Iran strongly opposes such agreements.

An additional cause for concern is Iran's relationship with the GCC's three southernmost countries -- Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. In these countries, Iranian influence has traditionally and historically far outweighed Iraq's. How credible, therefore, would a pan-GCC force be if threatened by Iran and if the force were commanded by one of these three countries?

The basis for such concern among the GCC's northernmost countries' is not imagined. They are well aware that Oman has consistently acknowledged the strategic imperative of maintaining good relations with Iran which it faces across the Hormuz Straits. Muscat is also keen to avoid antagonizing a neighboring country that outnumbers its citizens by a ratio of 50 to one.

Regarding the UAE, three islands belonging to two of its emirates, Ra's Al-Khaimah and Sharjah, have been occupied by Iran since 1971. Numerous UAE defense officials acknowledge the potential for further Iranian encroachments in the future.

Qatar, too, has reason to be far more concerned about Iran than Iraq. Qatar possesses one of the world's largest reservoirs of unassociated gas in its offshore North Field. The field extends well into the Iranian side of the Gulf's median line boundary. This past December, Iran successfully drilled into the field for the first time. Even though the two countries' record of cooperation has been commendable to date, the seeds nonetheless exist for a portentous and, in terms of power, vastly unequal dispute between the two countries over production and development of the field in the future. Hence, in any conflict with Iran, the credibility of a pan-GCC force headed by an Omani, Qatari, or Emirati commander-in-chief could be called into question.

## Egypt and Syria

A few days after the liberation of Kuwait, the GCC's Ministerial Council (comprised of the six members' foreign ministers) and the foreign ministers of Egypt and Syria met in Damascus. Their purpose was to discuss how best to begin building a new Arab order. At the end of the meeting, the eight countries' representatives signed the Damascus Declaration.

The Damascus Declaration dealt with a wide range of issues and enunciated various principles as a basis for inter-Arab relations in the future. Spokesmen in Cairo and Damascus suggested that Egyptian and Syrian forces would be forming integral components of a Gulf security scheme. In so indicating, spokesmen implied that the signatories had opted for a historically unprecedented concept, namely that Egyptian and Syrian troops would be central to a *Gulf* security arrangement.

Since the spokesmen implied that the troops would not merely be assisting in a pan-Arab force to protect the six northernmost *Arabian Peninsula* countries, they provoked a rejectionist and condemnatory reaction from Iran. Tehran would not possibly accept a regional security arrangement that included two countries from outside the Gulf. Iran served notice that it would not agree to an arrangement among signatories that neither consulted with nor referred to, but rather excluded, the country with the largest Gulf coastline and a citizenry more than quadruple in size to that of all the GCC countries combined.

Reassessing the implication of such an arrangement was awkward for the GCC and, in the short run, the source of critical comment by the media in Egypt and Syria. It was necessary, however, in order not to damage the GCC's strategy of engaging Iran constructively on as many fronts as possible. Conceding the validity of Iran's concerns also precluded the GCC's contradicting its previous support for Article Eight of UN Security Council Resolution 598 of July 1987. Article Eight called for a "comprehensive" accord, *i.e.*, a tripolar agreement among Iran, Iraq, and the GCC, on Gulf security. The Article's objective had been a cornerstone of GCC strategy since the Iran-Iraq ceasefire.

The scaled down prospects for the eight countries' collective defense cooperation notwithstanding, the Declaration's principles for governing inter-Arab relations in the future remain alive and relevant since the GCC, Egypt, and Syria agree that inter-Arab relations in the postwar period must be restructured to preclude a breakdown that would allow a recurrence of the Kuwait crisis.

By restructuring inter-Arab relations, the signatories hope that the Arab League will be able to resume its previous role as a forum for addressing, ameliorating, managing, and possibly resolving inter-Arab disputes. However, for the above to occur, either the League's Charter will have to be amended to incorporate a new set of ground rules, or the members will have to acknowledge, *de facto*, that the new principles will govern their inter-relationships in the future.

More specifically, the Declaration's signatories agreed in Article One of the Declaration that the following principles of coordination and cooperation must be followed: respect for the territorial integrity of the existing Arab state system, the equality of sovereignty, the inadmissibility of gaining territory by force, non-intervention in other countries' domestic affairs, and commitment to settle disputes by peaceful means.

An additional principle, contained in Article 1 (5) of the Declaration, is that the region's natural resources belong rightfully to the countries in which they are located. The "rich versus poor" issue which re-surfaced during the Kuwait crisis is thus addressed. Poorer Arab countries are uncomfortable with the implications of this principle. However, the GCC stresses that the principle is not new; it has been accepted by all Arab countries since the 1950s when the quest for sovereign control over their natural resources began to gather momentum.

### Iran

At first glance, the Declaration's principles regarding inter-state relations may seem bland and innocuous. Behind the language, however, lie important concepts. As the Kuwait summit made clear, several of the Declaration's principles apply as much to Iran as to other Arab countries. Indeed, the GCC insists that Iran incorporate these concepts into its behavior toward the GCC. Without an acceptance of these principles, Iran will not have any prospect of securing the GCC's political goodwill or economic assistance.

The signatories agreed that the principles applicable to Iran are: (1) non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries; (2) peaceful settlement of inter-state disputes; (3) respect for international law and legitimacy; (4) recognition of existing, internationally recognized, national borders; and (5) "good neighborliness."

All five principles have been the antithesis of Iranian policies and actions toward the GCC for most of the period since 1980 and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war. In this regard, Kuwait's 1991 summit merely re-emphasized the consensus of previous summits, especially the 1987 summit in Riyadh which posited a set of minimum standards for Iran to manifest in its relations with the GCC.

Concerns about Iran continue to run deep. Especially objectionable are: 1) Iran's strident denunciation of the GCC's reliance on Allied Coalition forces to build a more credible system of deterrence and defense in the Gulf; 2) Tehran's continuing intrusion into the domestic affairs of other countries, e.g., Lebanon, increased support for religious extremists in Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Sudan, Tunisia, Yemen, and the six Islamic republics of the former Soviet Union; 3) its pattern of hunting down and assassinating opponents of the Iranian regime abroad; and 4) Iran's insistence on having a predominant role in future Gulf security arrangements, undercutting its accession to the aforementioned UN Resolution 598, which envisioned a tripolar balance among Iran, Iraq, and the GCC countries, not predominance by any one of the three.

Iran's ambitious re-armament efforts and its insistence on having a critical voice in any GCC-related defense arrangements are evidence that Tehran's intentions toward the GCC are less than benign. The moderation of some of its tactics notwithstanding, Iran is likely to remain a strategic adversary.

For the short term, however, the GCC is comforted by the unlikelihood of an Iranian military threat since Tehran needs massive infusions of foreign capital to revive its ailing economy. Iran's current situation provides a much-needed breathing space which could benefit the GCC's planning for defense. Nevertheless, the GCC will continue to accentuate the positive in its relations with Iran. If its efforts are not reciprocated and Iran fails to practice the principles contained in the Damascus Declaration, it will jeopardize not only its diplomatic relations, commercial ties, and exchanges

of officials and business and professional leaders with the GCC countries, but also its foreign investment prospects.

### **The Great Powers**

The GCC perceives the UN Security Council's five permanent members as the world's Great Powers. For the GCC, the permanent members form the geopolitical core of its hopes for building a successful system of deterrence and defense.

Lacking the demographic, industrial, or technological base to field a credible army of its own for protection against more powerful potential adversaries, the GCC acknowledges the vital necessity of being able to borrow such power from its friends, allies, and strategic partners. In this regard, the U.S., Great Britain, France, Russia, and China all have potentially very important roles to play in enhancing the GCC's prospects for deterrence and defense.

All five of these countries were critical to the internationally concerted action in defense of the GCC following Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. They were essential to the twelve UN Security Council Resolutions that sought to reverse the aggression and compel Iraq to abide by the frequently articulated GCC principle of international legitimacy.

The GCC knows that the support of these five countries may not be as forthcoming in the future as it was in the Kuwait crisis. However, a high priority for the GCC is to obtain an unambiguous commitment that these and other countries will defend the GCC in the event of a renewed threat to their security.

Some GCC countries have moved faster in this direction than others. All, however, agree that only in association with the vastly superior defense systems of the Great Powers is the GCC likely to repel any aggression in the future. No combination of pan-GCC, pan-Arab, or pan-Islamic forces is likely to project a comparable degree of capability and credibility.

Since its liberation, Kuwait has outpaced other GCC countries in enlisting Great Power support for its future defense requirements. Prior to the summit, Kuwait authorized the United States to pre-position equipment and utilize Kuwait's military facilities and logistical and operational services in the event of a future threat to Kuwait. A similar agreement is to be signed between Kuwait and Great Britain, and discussions are underway for an additional one with France. Kuwait also intends to strengthen and expand its longstanding close relationship with Moscow. Moreover, an as yet unspecified arrangement or understanding will be sought with China.

Bahrain has also signed a similar agreement with the U.S. Oman, which entered into such an arrangement with the U.S. as early as 1980, renewed that agreement in 1990. Qatar and the UAE are engaged in discussions with the U.S. which may lead to yet additional agreements. The British and French, moreover, are likely to provide at least tacit assurances of future support to virtually any GCC country. If requested, China and Russia would welcome playing a more tangible role in GCC defense planning. Both countries would likely respond positively were any GCC country to place orders for advanced military equipment.

In contrast to the other GCC countries, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to sign a formal defense agreement with any of the Great Powers because of widespread domestic opposition to such an agreement and Riyadh's belief that UN Article 51 is sufficient for securing assistance if needed. Saudi Arabia, as the

guardian of Islam's two holiest places, also wishes to avoid a repeat of the controversy that was engendered by its having Western troops on its soil. Until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is solved and legitimate Christian and Muslim rights with respect to Jerusalem are secured, most Arab and Islamic countries would oppose Saudi Arabia's relying formally on Western forces for its defense.

The Kingdom is also uncertain with respect to support from the U.S. Congress for such an agreement. Saudi strategists believe that the prospects for objectionable conditions being attached to a draft agreement are high and not worth the risk.

\* \* \*

Although the above items dominated the agenda at Kuwait, the summiters also considered other matters. For example, they acknowledged the need for greater momentum towards further implementation of their 1981 Economic Unity Agreement. Accordingly, they vowed to make 1992 a year in which they would work harder at implementing the principles of the agreement, especially those pertaining to the free movement of people, goods, and services, promotion of joint ventures between and among the member countries, and placing relationships with their principal trading partners on a firmer footing. Regarding the last-mentioned item, the summiters were buoyed by the imminent renewal of their economic dialogue with the U.S. Government.

Both the GCC and the U.S. recognize to a greater extent than before the advantages that could ensue from a tightening of their private sector links. A GCC-US relationship that is strong, healthy, and mutually beneficial is seen by both sides as enhancing not only the GCC's deterrence and defense capabilities, but also as improving the prospects for GCC and U.S. economic development and prosperity in the postwar period.