

John Duke Anthony

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Bombs Bring No Joy, But Gulf Leaders Blame Saddam

As heavy-laden bombers bound for Baghdad carry out their mission, there is scant glance into the rear view mirror to understand what happened here last week. Pity that, for in the global surfing of news reports from CNN and other broadcast networks from Baghdad to Washington, London, New York, and back again, much is missing by way of background, context, and perspective.

True, in the run-up to this latest round of deadly point-vs.-counterpoint, one cannot say that all were not adequately forewarned. All who counted were consulted as to what might need to transpire if Iraq, as has happened, failed to come clean in the eyes of the UNSCOM inspection team in Iraq.

Indeed, when the heads of the six Arab Persian Gulf countries convened here for their annual summit last week, world leaders kept a close eye. The leaders' concern centered on the potential regional implications of a turn of events that no one wanted to see happen.

Mindful that the use of force in human affairs is never without blemish, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders considered what more they and their American, British, and other Arab allies — most notably Egypt and Syria — might have done to produce an outcome different than the one at hand. As the summiters deliberated, an Anglo-American armada stood by, only minutes away, prepared to exercise force should Iraq persist in defying UN Security Council-mandated sanctions imposed as a result of Baghdad's 1990 invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

The leaders — their own countries' commanders-in-chief — came down with a surprisingly strong condemnation of Iraq. They pronounced loud and clear that they, too, like the U.S., were willing to give diplomacy one last chance. And they proclaimed that whatever harm befell Saddam Hussein and his regime for its defiance of the UN sanctions would be of his own doing and no one else's.

The six GCC nations taking such a stance — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates — are no ordinary developing

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countries. As evidence, the secretaries general of the 187-member United Nations, the 55-member Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the 22-member League of Arab States all arranged to be present — a historic first since the GCC's founding in 1981.

One of the reasons was the area's enduring link to the cultural, emotional, and religious moorings of 2.5 billion people. For Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the religious days of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Ramadan underscore the fact that the broader region in which the GCC countries are situated is like no other place on Earth. Since olden times, these lands and ones adjacent to them have been the epicenter of prayer and pilgrimage — of faith and spiritual devotion — for more than half of humanity.

But the area is also a source of modern anxiety — particularly now that a maelstrom of conflict again hovers over Baghdad. Indeed, it is to the six GCC countries that United States-led coalitions have mobilized and deployed more troops in the past 15 years than anywhere else in the world. That fact alone is a stark reminder that the surrounding neighborhood remains an international fulcrum of competition and conflict — and, contradictory as it may seem, cooperation, as testified to by the GCC summit.

THE SIGNS OF "sanctions fatigue" — so evident in Iraq, and among the commercial sectors of China, France, Russia, and elsewhere — are also evident here. But while distant countries long to get a piece of Iraq's future oil production and lucrative contracts to rebuild the country's war-damaged economy, the focus of concern among the Arab heads of state in Abu Dhabi was — and is — quite different. All the GCC states' leaders insist upon Iraq's full compliance with the

UN resolutions out of a critical need to contain Iraq's capabilities for threatening its neighbors, as well as a hope for an end to the suffering of the Iraqi people under the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein.

The six heads of state are also united in their view that, punitive strikes against it notwithstanding, Iraq must not be broken into pieces, international law applicable to Iraq's actions against Kuwait and other countries must be upheld, and the many Kuwaitis and others whose lives and property were shattered beyond recovery by Iraq must be compensated. That includes Iraqi accountability for and repatriation of more than 600 Kuwaiti MIAs and POWs.

THE AMERICAN, Arab, British, and other allied troops currently on alert in the Gulf

would like nothing more than to be home for the holidays. Yet to leave untended the cause of freeing the hostages held by Iraq, or to be derelict in the duty of peacemaking and peacekeeping in a region of vital importance to all of humankind, or to fail to respond to Iraq's repeated defiance of the UN-imposed sanctions for its rape of Kuwait are not options.

For their loved ones who grieve, no less than for the hostages themselves, the issue of the missing and unaccounted-for casualties of Iraq's brutal aggression against Kuwait — like the not-forgotten American MIAs from the Vietnam War — is not about to go away. The quest for their return remains a heavy burden upon the leaders of the GCC countries — and their partners, most especially the United States — in their pursuit of regional peace and stability.

No one here will cheer the bloodshed. The victims of Saddam Hussein will include many innocents among their fellow Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims of Iraq. On the threshold of the holiest season of the world's three monotheistic faiths, tears trickle down the wings of doves.

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