

The Intifada, the U.S. and GCC Countries

Thursday, August 30, 2001

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Background:

For Arab leaders today, the issue of greatest, almost overriding regional concern is the matrix of U.S. policies and positions toward the current *intifada*. Palestinian resistance to Israeli military occupation since September 2000 and the U.S. response have greatly impacted U.S. relations with all Arab states and the 34 non-Arab Islamic nations. This issue affects most, if not all, other issues in U.S. relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

An increasing number of U.S. diplomats and military leaders in the Middle East admit privately that anti-American sentiment, stemming from the way the U.S. has handled the *intifada*, is greater than at any time in memory. The root of this disappointment is perceived U.S. failure on several fronts, among which many believe the greatest is Washington's inability to advance and protect its own interests in the region.

U.S. interests range from strategic, economic, and political matters to those of a commercial, defense, and developmental nature. These interests are inevitably influenced by the degree of local and regional goodwill expressed toward the United States. Maintaining and strengthening U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Middle East will depend in large measure on whether the countries in the region are predisposed to cooperate.

The Economic Importance of the GCC States:

By the benchmark of four people per average U.S. family, the source of livelihood for more than a million Americans is directly associated with the states of the GCC alone, through their purchasing of U.S. exports. Additionally, of some \$1 trillion in GCC capital invested abroad, 60 percent of it is invested in the United States. GCC energy exports to the United States fuel countless factories and other workplaces employing millions, cool millions homes and offices, and propel millions of vehicles.

These examples underscore what is at stake: the extensive benefits that millions of Americans derive from good U.S. relations with key Arab countries. At issue today is the fact that the United States is seen to be taking these countries and relations with them for granted. U.S. treatment of the Palestinian issue is an affront to GCC citizens' and many Americans' most basic notions of fairness and dignity, and a violation of stated U.S. principles related to democracy, human rights, freedom, and justice. GCC leaders need to be able to demonstrate to their citizens a capacity to persuade Washington to reconsider the implications of its policies and actions regarding the Palestinians. U.S. Arab allies in the region have concluded, however, that powerful lobbyists keen to advance Israeli interests and objectives have succeeded in intimidating American elected and appointed officials in such a way that the strategic interests of Israel, and not the multifaceted economic and national security interests of the United States, have prevailed—and at enormous and escalating costs to Israeli, Palestinian, and U.S. interests.

Double Standards:

All the more shocking to citizens of the GCC is the inability of U.S. officials to (1) see the many parallels between their forbears' quest for freedom and self-determination and that of the Palestinians, who struggle daily in their own land to be free of Israeli colonization and military subjugation, and (2) take into full account the elemental human rights and need for justice of the Palestinian people. One need cite only a few examples of alleged arrogance and application of double standards by the U.S. legislative and executive branches that in the eyes of the GCC and many other Arab and Islamic leaders have harmed U.S.-GCC and overall U.S.-Arab and U.S.-Islamic relations.

First, take the extraordinary imbalance in resolutions passed in the House and Senate in the fall of 2000 that overwhelmingly blamed the Palestinians and exonerated the Israelis for their respective roles in the violence that erupted last September. Second, in what many perceive as a transparent attempt to accommodate Israel, the United States led a campaign to stifle the efforts by Egypt, the GCC states, and most of the world's 140 developing nations to convene a conference in 1999 to honor the fiftieth anniversary of the Fourth Geneva Convention on the obligations of occupying powers. Third, Washington insists that the GCC and other countries support its demands that Iraq be held to account and made to comply with the UN Security Council resolutions resulting from its invasion and occupation of Kuwait. On the face of it, GCC leaders find nothing wrong with insisting that Iraq comply fully with these resolutions; however, they call attention to the fact that the United States consistently fails to demand that Israel be held similarly accountable for its defiance of the Security Council.

Many members of Congress seem to identify only with the suffering of Israelis. It seems out of character that they are unable or unwilling to express any remotely comparable empathy or compassion toward the greater suffering that Israel has inflicted upon Christian and Muslim Palestinians. Few within the GCC region are convinced that the United States is fully aware of the damage that it has inflicted upon its relations with key Arab countries.

Long-Term Interests:

It is difficult for GCC leaders to accept the United States' rationale for its support of Israeli policies. Israel's rising number of critics argue that its limited assets offer little of enduring geopolitical or strategic value, or for that matter, much else of lasting benefit to broader U.S. foreign policy objectives. GCC decision makers, in short, continue to be amazed by the seeming inability of U.S. leaders to do what is right by the benchmark of long-term U.S. and Israeli national interests. Many wonder: How can Israelis or Americans possibly gain anything when the effect of their actions has such a negative impact on their respective relations, real as well as potential, with the much broader community of the six GCC member states, the 22 Arab nations, and the 56 Islamic countries in which a range of vital and multifaceted Arab, Islamic, Israeli, and U.S. interests are at stake?

The Need for Greater Humility:

GCC and other Arab leaders reason that given the U.S. track record, there are a few steps the United States can take to improve its image and repair damaged relations with Arab countries, such as restraining congressional and administration officials' moralizing, application of double standards, and hypocritical posturing. A greater willingness to listen and learn from friends in the region and become an even-handed and effective broker for peace would also be appreciated.

The heads of state of all the Arab and Islamic countries expressed their hope last October 2000 that the U.S. position toward the Palestinians would, at a minimum, be just and humane. Perhaps they realize how empty the U.S. rhetoric of "democracy" at times can be. A little justice, an abatement of cruelty, an expression of compassion for all who have been wronged would go far.

There is little reason to believe that U.S. business with key Arab countries will continue as usual unless there is a fundamental change in the actions and attitudes of the United States vis-à-vis the tragedies that continue to be visited upon the Palestinian people, including political assassinations, collective punishment, siege, and the use of U.S. weapons against civilians. The shortcomings of the Bush administration's reactions to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the *intifada* are injuring the relationships of the U.S. with countries whose friendship, trust, and confidence the United States needs most. Any effort to improve relations with these countries will require greater vision, statesmanship, and courage—personal, political, and, above all, moral—than has been exhibited thus far.

Key Recommendations:

In the eyes of many GCC leaders, the United States should at the least make an effort to hold Israel accountable for the following:

- its ongoing occupation of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian lands, which has been far longer and equally illegal when compared to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait; its refusal to cease building colonies on expropriated Palestinian and Syrian lands; its unwillingness to consider truly sharing sovereignty over Jerusalem; its opposition to even a minimal and incrementally phased repatriation of Palestinian refugees; and
- its use of vastly superior, U.S.-supplied armaments to crush the Palestinians' internationally sanctioned right to resist the occupation.

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