



The Gulf States and the End of Dual Containment

By Joshua Teitelbaum*

Historians are usually most comfortable addressing issues of the past. Nevertheless, an analysis of the Gulf states and the U.S. policy of dual containment is well-suited to a historian, since -- as far as those states are concerned -- dual containment really is history.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein himself, by invading Kuwait in 1990, inaugurated a five-to-six-year period of unfettered U.S. hegemony in the Gulf. Saddam's deed was unprecedented and entirely unforeseen by the leaderships of the Gulf region. With the support Saddam received in the Arab street, the Gulf countries' leaders were fearful for their regimes. While it was uncomfortable, to say the least, for countries like Saudi Arabia to be rescued by Christian Americans, it was preferable to being swallowed up by Saddam.

The United States put together an impressive international coalition, and accomplished no more and no less than it had promised: to remove Saddam from Kuwait. And the U.S. was not shy about calling in the cards. In the next five years or so, Saudi Arabia followed the U.S. lead: It bought billions of dollars of U.S. arms, supported the Madrid conference and the Oslo agreement, and even partly ended the boycott of Israel.

This was not easily done because the Kingdom's natural preference is to follow -- not set -- an Arab consensus on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Saudi Arabia also gave dual

containment a chance and followed U.S. policy on Iraq and Iran.

How and why did the United States lose this advantage, including the demise of dual containment? Saudi Arabia and Iran are heirs to two very different religious traditions, which have been in conflict for hundreds of years. This tension, however, is not only religious -- it is national as well. Both Persian Iran and Arab Saudi Arabia are countries vying for hegemony in the Persian -- or Arabian -- Gulf. In fact, the very argument over the name of that body of water has become emblematic of that rivalry.

Saudi Arabia also has a long list of grievances against Iran since the 1989 Islamic revolution, mostly concerning subversion among Saudi Arabia's Shi'i population in its Eastern province. Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of the same in majority Shi'a Bahrain. Therefore, until about mid-1996, U.S. policies of containing Iran dovetailed quite neatly with Saudi goals and fears, and the Saudi supported the policy.

But changes in both Saudi Arabia and Iran -- the same changes which forced the United States itself to reexamine its policy of containing Iran -- have brought a radical change in Saudi Arabia's Iranian policy, which Riyadh is now calling a "detente" or "rapprochement." The roots of this change are manifold.

First, Saudi Arabia, in effect, has a new king. `Abdallah bin `Abd al-Aziz, crown prince and half-brother of King Fahd,

has been running the Kingdom's day-to-day affairs since November 1995. The new leader seems intent on making his mark and shifting the direction of the Kingdom's foreign policy.

As predicted, `Abdallah has decided to embark on an independent path whereby Saudi Arabia puts a priority on regional relationships. Moreover, this move toward Iran comes at a time, paradoxically, when the Saudis -- apparently --- believe Iran was directly or indirectly responsible for the June 1996 bombing of the al-Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran which killed 19 U.S. soldiers. The Saudis never accused Iran publicly but leaked the accusation widely. In late March 1998, Saudi Minister of Interior Na'if bin `Abd al-`Aziz suddenly announced the investigation had been closed but released no findings. The United States said that it had not been informed of this development and considers the investigation still open.(1)

All this leads to one conclusion: Riyadh is holding back the full details of the investigation in order to prevent a U.S. reprisal against Iran.(2) Interior Minister Na'if 's public refusal to confirm the Iranian connection speaks volumes concerning Saudi Arabia's dilemma. This action not only reflects Saudi wishes to turn over a new leaf with Iran, but also a determination to put its own regional concerns above those of its main military backer. Riyadh has witnessed a general lack of U.S. resolve with respect to Iran and is probably concerned about talk in Washington about reassessing dual containment.

Moreover, if there was a public statement about an Iranian connection, the United States would most likely feel compelled to retaliate. Saudi Arabia worried that the United States might undertake military operations strong enough to enrage Iran, but not enough to cause any lasting change.

Iran for its part, was interested in exploiting Saudi fears to ensure Riyadh's stamp of approval for the December 1997 Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) summit, held in Tehran. This was a colossal event, which marked the Islamic world's confirmation of the legitimacy of Iran's Islamic revolution.

The rapprochement between Teheran and Riyadh rapidly took on the trappings of a honeymoon, complete with mutual visits and complementary statements. In March 1997, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati crossed the Gulf to clear the air and personally invite Arab Gulf leaders to the summit. He met with Fahd and other top Saudi officials.

The Saudi press responded quite enthusiastically to this visit. One newspaper wrote: "The two countries have so many things in common, and shared security interests are such that the two countries would do well to overcome the crisis of confidence bedeviling their relations. The facts that favor an existential partnership between the Kingdom and Iran are many. They go beyond such things as common border and they share Islamic faith."

The paper concluded that the two countries are in the same boat, both in times of war and peace, and it would serve them well to take "direct responsibility" -- rather than delegate it to the United States -- for security arrangements in the Gulf.(3)

After Mohammed Khatemi was elected president of Iran in May 1997, these warming relations went into high gear. Congratulatory messages were sent.(4) In late June, the two countries, traditionally at loggerheads over oil policy, spearheaded an effort to convince OPEC countries to stop violating oil production quotas. One of the biggest promoters of this dialogue, Iran's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, revealed that he had even met with the Kingdom's top cleric and arbiter of Wahhabism, General Mufti Shaykh `Abdallah Bin Baz, and other

members of the Saudi Council of Senior `Ulama.(5) This is especially significant since Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Islam has often been the most strident critic of Iran's Shi'i Islam.

In September 1997, direct flights resumed between Tehran and Jeddah -- the first such scheduled flights in 18 years.(6) The strongest signal of the positive reassessment of its relations with Tehran came in December 1997, with the attendance of a high-level Saudi delegation at the Iranian-chaired OIC summit. The delegation was headed by `Abdallah, who even offered publicly to mediate between the U.S. and Iran. "It is not hard for our Iranian brothers or for a friendly country like Iran or for a friendly country like the United States to reach a settlement [of] their differences," he stated. (7)

`Abdallah met with Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and with Khatemi for two rounds of talks. The deputy commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and `Abdallah's second in command, Shaykh `Abd al-`Aziz al-Tuwayjiri assessed that "Iran and the Arabs [were] heading for more cooperation and coordination which will allow them take their natural place in the world and to serve the Islamic nation."(8)

The Saudi daily al-Riyadh actually called after the summit for a non-aggression pact between all the Gulf states, including Iran.(9) In mid-February 1998, Ayatollah Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of Iran's Expediency Council and a hardliner compared to Khatemi, visited Saudi Arabia for nearly two weeks. This was done with the blessing of Iran's hardline spiritual leader, Ali Khamenei.

President Khatemi has a long list of development plans that he cannot implement because of the low price of oil. Coordination on oil policy with Saudi Arabia is therefore essential. Rafsanjani was accompanied by three ministers and `Abdallah gave a

banquet in his honor. Again, the Saudi press gushed that Saudi Arabia and Iran were like two wings, without whose cooperation a bird cannot fly.(10) Rafsanjani met with Saudi businessmen and implored them to open the country to Iranian labor. The two countries agreed to set up a joint commission to study bilateral relations.

Foreign Minister Sa`ud Al Faysal termed the visit a new chapter in bilateral relations.(11) A particularly revealing incident occurred during Rafsanjani's visit. While at Friday prayers in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, the imam of the mosque subjected Rafsanjani to a vitriolic diatribe against Shi'ism, the kind of statement Wahhabi preachers often make. Several top Shi'i clerics in Iran issued fatwas forbidding Iranians, when they came to the prophet's Mosque in Medina, to be led in prayer by this particular imam. But the head of Iran's hajj delegation, Ayatollah Reyshari, who was a representative of Khatemi, said that this was not proper, and to do so -- to boycott this imam -- would give Iran and Shi'is a bad name. Appreciatively, the Saudis fired the imam. Rafsanjani later categorically denied that Saudi Arabia was against Shi'ism, an accusation frequently made by Iranian political and religious leaders.(12)

This seemed to be a case of both sides mutually reining in their respective hardliners for the sake of good bilateral relations.

More visits followed, including the March 1998 visit of an Iranian warship, which docked at Jeddah. During the last hajj, Fahd's son, Faysal, who heads Saudi Arabia's sports commission, invited the entire Iranian soccer team to made the pilgrimage at his expense in appreciation for their qualifying for the World Cup tournament.(13) Even Khamenei himself has praised the improvement in relations and expressed hope that they would develop even more.

For the Saudis, the goal is to get along in the neighborhood. If the United States cannot get rid of Saddam, then Saudi Arabia will have to make local arrangements, with Iran as an important partner, at least in the short term. There is much room for cooperation. For Iran, the goal is to counterbalance Iraq and get the United States out of the region. The Kingdom still feels a threat from Tehran but needs Iran to coordinate oil production and contain Iraq.

But Gulf states remain skeptical toward Iran. The New York Times quoted Bahrain's Crown Prince Shaykh Hamad bin `Isa, who joked to a senior U.S. official: "In Iran you have three people in charge: you have Khamenei, who is in charge of religion and terrorism. You have Rafsanjani, and he is in charge of business and terrorism. And then you have Khatemi, and he is in charge of internal politics, moderation and terrorism." (14)

Regarding Iraq, the other component of dual containment, the February 1998 crisis was marked by a distinct lack of Saudi support for U.S. efforts to pressure Baghdad. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to drum up support for a military strike was met by a stone wall in Saudi Arabia. She left without getting `Abdallah's approval for the United States to use Saudi airbases. When Secretary of Defense William Cohen followed, he still could not get approval for the use of Saudi airbases. Defense Minister Sultan bin `Abd al-Aziz later rejected the possibility. The U.S. effort was seen as insensitive to local concerns, bullying, and embarrassing. (15)

The Saudis still hate Saddam and revile him in their press. They blame him for the suffering of the Iraqi people, and the newspapers call practically every day for his overthrow. But the Saudis are convinced that the United States is not going to remove Saddam by direct means and that previous pinprick attacks only strengthened him.

Sanctions are not removing him but only hurting the Iraqi people. The Saudi press pleaded with the United States to take out Saddam himself, instead of waging a war on the entire country. One newspaper wrote that he is not an impossible target. The United States had captured Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1990. (16) Although Saudi Arabia is the unquestioned leader of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), there are differences within the GCC over dual containment and what it means for regional relations.

Qatar, for instance, never endorsed dual containment. As Foreign Minister Shaykh Hamad bin Jasim told Middle East Quarterly, "we cannot afford to have enemies in the region." (17) Iran has often pointed to its relationship with Qatar as the ideal paradigm for its links with other Gulf states. (18) Over the years, there has been a constant stream of visitors and even visits of Iranian warships. Qatar has urged the United States and Iran to normalize relations. As far as Iraq is concerned, Qatar has supported increased humanitarian aid and there have been high level meetings with Iraqi officials.

Even Bahrain, which has openly accused Iran of being behind nearly four years' of severe unrest among its majority Shi'i population is now following the Saudi lead on Iran. It has welcomed the new leadership in Tehran and has probably received assurances of non-interference in its internal affairs. Rafsanjani was received quite warmly there in March 1998.

With respect to Iraq, Bahrain has gone beyond the Saudis and received Iraqi officials. Bahrain announced that it would not allow the use of its territory for military operations against Iraq, although this was later contradicted by the U.S. State Department.

Oman's relations with Iran have been the strongest of any of the GCC countries. Omani officials have spoken out often against the U.S. policy of isolating Iran,

saying that dialogue was preferable. Foreign Minister Yusuf bin `Alawi went so far as to state that Iran's isolation jeopardized Gulf security.(19) Cooperation continues between the navies of the two countries.(20) On Iraq, Oman has counseled caution and called for direct U.S.-Iraqi talks to defuse the crisis.

Kuwait, of course, has supported the United States down the line on Iraq, but has a more nuanced approach with respect to Iran, which it sees as necessary to balance Baghdad. Kuwait, more than any other country is dependent on America, so is subject to more pressure. Nevertheless, while putting their faith in the United States, they do not want to antagonize Tehran.

As for the United Arab Emirates, they have their own particular problem with Iran over the occupation of three Gulf islands, which the Emirates claim. The Iranians, over the past few years, have aggressively asserted their sovereignty over these islands by establishing military and civilian structures there. This is the background to the UAE position in favor of Iraq. Fearful that a powerful Iran and a weak Iraq had created a strategic imbalance in the region, the UAE took the lead among the Gulf states in calling for the rehabilitation of Baghdad, aggressively opposing U.S. policy.

It is manifestly clear that the attitude of the Gulf states toward Iran has undergone significant change, while the Gulf monarchies' attitude toward Iraq has softened somewhat. While during the cold war the U.S. was able to count on fear of Soviet aggression to force the Gulf states to follow much of Washington's regional agenda, it appears that in a unipolar system the leverage of the U.S. has weakened.

Another, more creative and nuanced approach to Iran and Iraq is needed, one that takes into account the regional concerns of U.S. Gulf allies. By altering its own stance toward Tehran, the United States can create a basis for new cooperation with these regional allies. The case of Iraq is more

complex and relatively more stable, but more shifts are likely in the future.

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NOTES

- 1) Riyadh TV, 30 March (FBIS Daily Report -- henceforth, DR); AP, 30 March 1998.
- 2) The assertion that Iranian-backed Saudi Shi'is were behind the bombing must still be viewed cautiously. The Sunni Saudi opposition has insisted that the regime has imprisoned Sunni Saudis for the operation. Moreover, information leaked on the Iranian connection is from Saudi sources who have an interest in pointing at Iranian involvement to draw attention away from the more threatening problem of the Sunni Islamic opposition (on this, see the author's Washington Institute for Near East Policy "Policywatch" at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/Policywatch/policywatch1997/255.htm>).
- 3) Al-Riyadh, 17 March 1997.
- 4) Reuters, 25 May, 9 June 1997.
- 5) Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 4 July 1997.
- 6) IRNA, 20 September 1997 (DR).
- 7) AFP, 8 December 1997.
- 8) Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 12 December 1997.
- 9) Cited in AFP, 15 December 1997.
- 10) Tehran Times, 26 January (DR); IRNA, 21 February (DR), al-Riyadh, 23 February 1998.
- 11) Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 24 February ; Reuters, 22, 28 February; IRNA, 28 February, 2 March 1998 (DR).
- 12) Al-Quds al-`Arabi, 28 February; AFP, 14, 17 March; Jomhuri-ye Eslami, 4, 7, 14

- March (DR); IRIB TV, 7, 25 March (DR); IRNA, 15 April 1998 (DR).
- 13) AFP, 8 March; Mideast Mirror, 26 March 1998.
- 14) New York Times, 12 April 1998.
- 15) AFP, 2, 8, 14 February 1998.
- 16) `Ukaz, 8 February; AFP, 2 February; Washington Times, 3 February 1998, citing al-Riyadh.
- 17) Middle East Quarterly, December 1996.
- 18) See, for instance, Iran News, 25 July; IRNA, 25 December 1996 (DR).
- 19) Reuters, 6, 28 May 1996.
- 20) See, for example, IRNA, 9 October 1996 (DR).