

---

## The Gulf's International Relations: Interests, Alliances, Dilemmas and Paradoxes (ARI)

*Haizam Amirah-Fernández\**

**Theme:** Security and the intervention of external powers are at the heart of the Gulf countries' foreign policies.<sup>1</sup>

**Summary:** The heavy dependence of the international system on the Gulf states' energy resources has conditioned their international relations, making them highly complex and subject to the establishment of alliances to defend or challenge the *status quo* and to security dilemmas which often lead to paradoxes and contradictions. The Arab countries in the Gulf –and in its day the Iran of the Shah– have chosen to outsource their security by resorting to the protection of foreign powers, mainly the US, thus opening the door to a foreign military presence in the region. One of the paradoxes is that this dependence on foreign powers undermines the internal legitimacy of the petro-monarchies and encourages local opposition movements.

**Análisis:** The world we know today would not be the same without the eight countries that border the Persian Gulf. The development model based on hydrocarbons would be inconceivable without the resources extracted over almost a century in a region that includes Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This model could not have survived without the region's oil and natural gas deposits. With known oil reserves approaching 750,000 million barrels (accounting for more than 60% of the world total) and over 40% of the world's natural gas reserves, these eight countries are the world's main source of energy. Approximately 40% of the world's seaborne oil shipments and 25% of the world's daily oil consumption pass through the only sea passage out of the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz.

These countries have undergone huge transformations in recent years due to the rapid growth of their economies and infrastructures and to the social and cultural changes that have come about as a result of globalisation and the use of new technologies, all of which has had an influence on their international relations. Apart from hydrocarbons, the Gulf's importance has increased due to the appearance of large international business and finance centres, as well as to its capacity for investment and the growing presence of emerging powers (China and India). To this should be added the rise in Iran's regional power following the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the tensions caused by its regional ambitions, especially with the US and Israel.

---

\* Senior Analyst for Mediterranean and Arab World at the Elcano Royal Institute.

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this ARI was published in the magazine *Afkar/Ideas*, nr 28, winter 2010-2011, p. 81-84, <http://www.afkar-ideas.com>.

---

The heavy dependence of the international system on the Gulf states' energy resources has conditioned their international relations, making them highly complex and subject to the establishment of alliances to defend or challenge the *status quo* and to security dilemmas which often lead to paradoxes and contradictions.

#### *Security-focused Relations*

The Gulf's international relations are, among other things, focused on security. It is because of internal reasons, such as the authoritarian nature of their political systems and the rentier nature of their economies, as well as regional rivalries and tension, that the international –and domestic– policies of the Gulf regimes have traditionally been focused on considerations conditioned to a large extent by security. Since the early days of the British Empire, the international powers have attached a great strategic importance to the region, first as a route to the British colonies in India and afterwards, following the discovery of oil at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a source for increasingly essential hydrocarbons.

One element that all of the leaders in the Gulf have in common, which is vital for explaining their behaviour and decisions, is their desire to hold on to power internally. This means that when making alliances their political calculations depend, above all, on their perception of how regional events and the moves of their rivals could endanger their own safety and perpetuation in power. Many decisions that affect individual and collective freedoms and the distribution of resources are taken in the name of 'national security', when they are really for the 'security of the regime' and its representatives.

#### *A History of Interests, Alliances and Unexpected Consequences*

The British presence in the Gulf extended beyond the UK's withdrawal from India in 1947, and came to a formal end in 1971. That was when the small states of Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar gained their independence after decades under British protection (Kuwait had become independent a decade earlier and Oman two decades earlier). This created more incentives for the larger regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq) to compete for more influence in this tri-polar regional system. The oil crises of the 1970s gave these countries ample resources to increase their regional influence through different means.

The year 1979 was a turning point in international relations in the Persian Gulf and its neighbouring area due to five events of great importance: (1) the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the fall of the Shah; (2) the appearance of Saddam Hussein as Iraq's strong man; (3) the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; (4) the assault and seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic fundamentalists opposed to the Saudi regime; and (5) the signing of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Each of these events was a challenge for the strategic interests of the great powers in the Gulf as they disturbed the regional balance and prompted violent readjustments.

In December 1979, in order to guarantee its strategic interests, the US –with the help of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other countries– started to provide support to Islamist militants whose objective was to expel the Soviet army from Afghanistan. However, the defeat of the Soviet Union and its later collapse not only failed to bring safety to Afghanistan and its neighbours, but left a failed State in the hands of radical militants bent on forcibly imposing their extremist and puritanical version of Islam. This same mission and methods led to thousands of *Mujahideen* from Arab and Muslim countries (many of them from the Middle East) returning to their countries and thus contributing to the rise in militant radical Islamism. An unexpected consequence of US-Arab support for these 'fighters' against

---

Soviet imperialism in Afghanistan was the spread of transnational networks of *Jihadist* ideology willing to use terrorist methods against the US and its allies and clients, both within and outside the region.

Some months earlier, in July 1979, Saddam had managed to consolidate his personal power in Iraq. His plans included taking over the leading role in the Arab world following the ostracism Egypt had been subjected to as a result of its unilateral decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel in March of the same year. Iraq's wealth and the megalomaniacal ambitions of its ruler led him to attack the neighbouring Iran a few months later. Both the US and the monarchies in the Gulf felt their interests under threat by the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, but preferred to avoid a direct confrontation with Iran and decided to support Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War (1980-88). However, Iraq's military strength and the unbounded ambitions of its President, which again came to the fore with the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, sparked off the first large-scale US military action in the Arab world to free the small emirate and save its oil. As could be expected, this was not to be the last US military intervention in the region.

The coup in Iran in 1953 to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq, with US and British support, brought Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi to power with the intention of guaranteeing the West's interests in his country. However, the regime resorted too easily to violent repression against a population whose patience was exhausted at the beginning of 1979, when a mass popular movement brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. During the first decade of the Islamic Revolution –coinciding with the Iran-Iraq war and up to Khomeini's death– Iran launched an ideological campaign against the pro-US Arab oil monarchies in the Gulf.

The list of foreign interventions to transform the region's geopolitics and whose consequences have generated long-term effects contrary to those intended, is completed with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 with the declared objective of restoring democracy to the 'Greater Middle East' and eradicating terrorism. Almost eight years later, the military occupation has created greater points of instability in the region and has encouraged *Jihadist* movements, whose anti-Western narratives have been strengthened. There are no signs at present that any Arab regimes will voluntarily adopt democracy.

Despite the importance of the economic and commercial relations between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), European countries have taken a back seat in the Gulf's international relations, which have seldom deviated from the line set by Washington. The EU's attempts to apply an 'interregional' logic to its relationship with the petro-monarchies as a way of encouraging stability through political reforms and economic liberalisation have met with little success. Indeed, the negotiations to establish a Free Trade Area, initiated in 1990, have still not produced any results mainly due to disagreements of both a commercial nature and related to human rights violations. The main European nations have close relationships with the Gulf monarchies, which could explain their preference for strengthening bilateral policies as opposed to multilateral ones. One example was the opening by Nicolas Sarkozy in May 2009 of the first permanent French military base in the area, in Abu Dhabi.

### *Security Dilemmas*

The Persian Gulf is a highly conflict-prone region. Since 1980 it has witnessed three large-scale international wars: the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88, the (second) Gulf War in 1991 and the British-US invasion of Iraq in 2003. A consequence and cause of this regional

---

reality is that the main countries in the Gulf have for decades spent huge amounts of resources on all kinds of conventional weapons and on maintaining oversized armed forces, both in terms of troop numbers and the percentage of the GDP allocated to them. However, rather than enhancing their individual security, this has merely generated a constant climate of mistrust and has strengthened the rivalry between the neighbouring countries in the Gulf, while increasing the likelihood that a minor dispute can blow up into an unintended military confrontation.

In their efforts to guarantee their security, the Gulf regimes face a series of 'security dilemmas' for which there are no permanent solutions. The first one is to decide between investing in programmes aimed at improving their defensive capacity, with the risk that their neighbours might feel threatened and thus decide to adopt the same approach, or allocate resources to other ends, even though this will make them more vulnerable to external threats. A second dilemma, associated to the first, is the choice between developing their own armed forces or 'subcontracting' their defence to the major international powers. These two choices generate further dilemmas relating to having to deal with allies and enemies, whose roles may change over time (as, for instance, with the relationship between the Arab monarchs in the Gulf and Saddam Hussein before and after 1990). At the same time, they have to choose between keeping the region as immune as possible from international rivalries and confrontations, and attracting the direct intervention of foreign powers to provide security.

In practice, the Arab countries in the Gulf –and in its day the Shah's Iran– have chosen to outsource their security by resorting to the protection of foreign powers, mainly the US, thus opening the door to a foreign military presence in the region. One of the paradoxes is that this dependence on foreign powers undermines the internal legitimacy of the petro-monarchies and encourages local opposition movements. Those in opposition usually argue that their political leaders are incapable of defending their countries despite the thousands of millions of dollars they spend each year on weaponry. These movements are seen by the local regimes and the international powers as a threat to the region's stability, which means that the regimes themselves have no qualms in resorting to repressive methods. The opposition-repression spiral has, in turn, kept the violent *Jihadist* movement alive and active beyond the borders of their countries of origin (in the 9/11 attacks, 17 of the 19 air hijackers were from Arab countries in the Gulf).

The threats to 'regime security' in the Gulf countries go beyond the conventional risks associated with the use of military force and include ideological threats, related to the transnational identities in the region, religious threats (different interpretations of Islam, some opposed to the official version of each country) and, lastly, ethno-sectarian threats (divisions between Sunnis and Shias, and between Arabs, Kurds and Persians). These identities have proved to be useful for leaders and ideologues as cross-border social mobilisation drivers, thus generating mistrust between neighbours and manoeuvres to anticipate or counterattack in ideological battles.

#### *GCC: Half-hearted Regionalisation*

The GCC includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It was established in May 1981 as a response of the Arab petro-monarchies in the Gulf to the regional ambitions of the revolutionary Iran of Khomeini, as well as to the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran some months earlier. The US endorsed its creation under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, the largest of the six members and the one with the most resources. In this way, Riyadh was guaranteed the support of its smaller neighbours and

---

increased its influence within the tri-polar regional system against Iraq and Iran. However, the violent events that have occurred in the region since then have highlighted the limitations of the GCC as an organisation of regional cooperation, making it quite clear that its members prefer their bilateral relationships with the US to any regional agreement.

The countries in the GCC have opted not to develop a regional framework of cooperation in the field of security, instead preferring to maintain a degree of coordination as regards the perception of risk and their response to them. Since the creation of the GCC, the security of its members has depended on three factors: (1) the protection provided by the US; (2) the diplomacy they exert to avoid and defuse conflicts; and (3) the creation of internal alliances. However, these three levels reflect the organisation's limitations. Despite the obvious need to create a strategic alliance, several structural problems have made it impossible to achieve this goal. The nature of the regional regimes, the fear of the GCC's smaller members of the enormous power of Saudi Arabia, as well as the general lack of confidence in their own defence capacity, have meant that there are still no common policies within the Council. Its function is to accommodate common interests while preserving the individual safety of each ruling family.

Saudi Arabia, the GCC's leader, has promoted a foreign policy based on maintaining friendly relationships with different stakeholders, some of them opposed to each other (for example, in inter-Arab conflicts or in Arab-Israeli negotiations). In order to achieve this, Riyadh has resorted to constant balancing acts, an intense diplomatic activity and the mobilisation of its immense financial power and its networks based on the Salafi Islamic ideology. Maintaining the *status quo* is for Saudi Arabia and the other members a way of guaranteeing the perpetuation in power of their ruling families. The question is whether this formula will be sustainable in time, in light of the growing challenges the region is facing.

#### *The US Presence in the Gulf*

In 1943 President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that 'the defence of Saudi Arabia is essential for the defence of the US'. The same support for its allies in the Gulf was also expressed by other Presidents such as Truman, Eisenhower and Nixon. However, it was not until the events of 1979 that Washington announced the so-called 'Carter Doctrine', by which the US declared its willingness to use military force, if required, to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf. The so-called 'Reagan Corollary' to the doctrine, which was announced at the end of 1981 as a consequence of the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war, established that Washington would use military force to defend Saudi Arabia against any threat, from either near or far. In this way, the US made it clear that it considered the Gulf an area of vital importance for its strategic interests, with everything that this entailed both in diplomatic and even military terms.

America's growing ambitions following the end of the Cold War, along with the perception of a terrorist threat from the Near East and the Gulf have led the US to an ever greater and more costly military presence in the region, culminating in the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Until then the main objective of US policy in the area was above all to preserve stability. This unconditional support of regimes seen as guarantors of stability has been an open invitation for them to commit all manner of excesses against their populations and to maintain authoritarian and deeply patriarchal systems, all of which has distorted their natural socio-political development and generated discontent among their populations. One of the first victims has been the image of the US in the Arab and Islamic worlds in general.

---

Before 2003, any break in the regional *status quo* had been considered by the US as a threat that put its dominance in danger. However, the neo-conservatives in the George W. Bush Administration decided to alter the traditional focus with that of 'remaking' the region through the transformation of their political systems. By using preventive war and regime change, Bush tried to make the whole area more favourable to US interests at the risk of altering regional stability and the balance of power. Time is proving that the neo-conservative approach has succeeded in achieving the opposite of what it intended.

The US went from using countries in the region during the 1970s and 1980s to protect its interests to intervening directly and repeatedly in the 1990s. In this way, it moved from being the guarantor of regional stability at a distance to becoming the military hegemon, though in doing so it has been caught up in the conflicts of Afghanistan and Iraq, for which it cannot find satisfactory solutions, although President Obama is trying to return to the traditional –and most likely obsolete– focus of placing stability before all other considerations.

#### *Iran, the Uncomfortable Neighbour*

The successive leaders of Iran have long considered that their country's natural role is that of regional hegemon. This desire is mixed with a constant sense of insecurity and suspicions of the intentions of others. Since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian leaders have sought a balance between Khomeini's revolutionary vision and a pragmatic focus on international relations based on political calculation and the defence of national interests. This quest has often given rise to contradictions and inconsistencies in Iranian foreign policy. The highest degree of pragmatism can be found in their relationships with their Central Asian neighbours, where the intention is to ensure a stable balance, and with Russia and China, with whom Iran engages in military, commercial and technological exchanges and from whom it receives diplomatic support. This is quite different from the relationship between Iran and the Near East, which is marked by ideological antagonism and its opposition to the existence of the 'Zionist State'.

Iran's intention is that its neighbours and external agents recognise its role as a regional power whose capacity of influence is on the rise. To do this it is using its energy resources and granting contracts to companies from emerging powers. It also supports Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, seen by many in the region as resistance movements against Israeli occupation. Iran is also continuing with its plans to increase its deterrence capacity against the threats it perceives in the region (the presence of US forces in Iraq and in bases around the Gulf, NATO troops in Afghanistan, the possession of nuclear weapons by Israel, India, China and North Korea, and so on). It is striking that most populations in the Middle East, including Turkey, feel much less concerned about a potentially nuclear Iran than the US or Israel, or, for that matter, the regimes that govern them.

**Conclusions:** Since the creation of the GCC in 1981, the security of its members has depended on three factors: (1) the protection provided by the US; (2) the diplomacy used to avoid and defuse conflicts; and (3) the creation of internal alliances. However, these three levels reflect the organisation's limitations. The huge transformations that the Gulf countries have undergone in recent years due to the rapid development of their economies and infrastructures, together with the social and cultural changes caused by globalisation and the use of new technologies, have all had an influence on their international relations.

It is because of internal reasons, such as the authoritarian nature of their political systems and the rentier nature of their economies, as well as regional rivalries and tensions, that the international –and domestic– policy of the Gulf regimes has been traditionally focused on considerations conditioned to a large extent by security. One element that all of the leaders in the Gulf have in common is their desire to hold on to power internally. This means that their political calculations depend, above all, on their perception of how regional events and the moves of their rivals could endanger their own safety and perpetuation in power. Many decisions that affect individual and collective freedoms and the distribution of resources are taken in the name of ‘national security’ when they are really made for the ‘security of the regime’ and its representatives.

It seems clear that, as long as there is no reciprocal desire for Iran to be a part of an autochthonous regional safety system in the Gulf, alongside a pacified Iraq, mistrust will continue to drive the politics of the neighbouring countries and of the international powers, with the interests consequently being defended on an individual basis. Should this persist, the security dilemmas will continue to foster antagonistic positions in the Gulf and will encourage the same situations that have led to wars and instability in this part of the world, which is vital for the current –and foreseeably future– model of development.

*Haizam Amirah-Fernández*

*Senior Analyst for Mediterranean and Arab World at the Elcano Royal Institute*