

## Respecting Arab interests

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With the United States being dragged deeper and deeper into the Iraq quagmire and the Iranian nuclear programme looming as the key challenge and threat to not only regional but also international security and stability, the intense criticism by the US of Arab Gulf states, and particularly countries like Saudi Arabia, in the wake of September 11 has been shelved.

There is no longer talk of active democracy promotion within the Arab Gulf monarchies, promotion of bilateral free trade agreements with the GCC states, or the broad implementation of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Instead, the GCC states are once again characterised as welcome allies and portrayed as the “moderates” that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the rest of the diplomatic entourage can do business with. The recently proposed \$ 20 billion arms sale by the US to the region is one example of the current point of view in Washington. The envisioned support by Saudi Arabia for the planned international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict is another example.

Coupled with this return to business as usual by the US is the expectation that the Arab Gulf states, thankful for being taken out of the firing line on democracy promotion and human rights, will once again fall in line with the American policy line being projected in the region. When this does not happen, the criticism is renewed as occurred when the US Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad lashed out against what he considered the lack of support by the Gulf States in the US effort in Iraq or when the US Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stewart Levey criticised Saudi Arabia on September 12 for not doing enough to prosecute accused financiers of terrorism.

The underlying dilemma, within the existing complexities of regional and international politics, is that the US has so far failed to come to terms with the GCC states defining their own interests outside of the context of the need for US military protection. In the past, Gulf monarchies may have willingly, albeit grudgingly, gone along with much of US policy given the direct and more serious challenges posed by threats such as the Iranian revolution and the regime of Saddam Hussein. However, in the wake of the Iraq policy disaster, US policies are seen more as being a part of the problem of regional instability than as part of the solution. The formula of past US-GCC relations of security and protection for stable oil supplies, although still relevant, is no longer predominant and all-determining. Instead, the GCC states have begun to define their own national priorities and interests. This is something that the US needs to pay attention to.

The increasing differences between the US and the GCC states can be seen in a number of current examples: the position of the GCC states on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the debate concerning the Iranian nuclear programme, and of course also in reference to the US position in Iraq. On the Arab-Israeli front, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal made it clear on September 15 during a news conference with Secretary of State Rice and US Defence Secretary Robert Gates that the Kingdom might not attend the proposed peace conference being devised by Washington. “The Kingdom does not see any use from any meeting or conference ... if it is not comprehensive and if it does not tackle major issues,” he stated. How vague the US commitment to this conference remains was underlined during a press conference Secretary Rice held with Palestinian President Abbas in Ramallah on September

20 when she said: “The issue here is to move the process forward, to a document that will lay the foundation so there can be serious negotiations on the establishment of a Palestinian state as soon as possible.” A process leading to a document laying the foundation can certainly not be seen as substantive.

On Iran, the GCC countries recently announced their readiness to start negotiations on a trade agreement despite US-led efforts to further isolate Iran economically. While such talks are no doubt in the very initial stages, it is nevertheless a signal that the GCC states will follow their own economic interests. They see increased economic engagement as a vehicle to lessen overall political tensions. GCC Secretary-General Abdul Rahman Al-Attiyah also reiterated that Gulf Arab states favour a negotiated settlement to the standoff between Teheran and the west over Iran’s nuclear programme. “GCC states don’t want to see any brotherly or friendly country subjected to sanctions” and they support “opting for the language of peaceful dialogue to resolve all the problems liable to affect international security and stability,” he stated. Simply put, the GCC states do not want their current economic boom jeopardised by US policies that might result in a US-Iranian confrontation that could engulf the entire region.

While the GCC states would be ready to increase the pressure on Iran should Tehran maintain its obstructionist stance on the nuclear issue, the prevailing notion in the region is that there is still time to find a solution. What the GCC states fear most is pre-emptive action by the US against Iran a la Iraq with the region left to handle the consequences.

On Iraq, the GCC Secretary-General Attiyah also let it be known that the Arab Gulf States would not be used to help the US out of its Iraq dilemma. In reference to the proposed conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Attiyah said that he hoped that the proposed meeting would address core issues but that it should “not be aimed at linking movement in the Middle East peace process to developments in Iraq in a bid to attract Arab states to a conference whose real goal is to help (the US) get out of the Iraqi impasse.” The criticism voiced by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad about the lack of Arab Gulf support for the US efforts in Iraq were seen as an affront by those in the region who, from the very outset, had warned the US administration about the situation it was getting involved in. However, those concerns were simply brushed aside then. To now place the blame for a lack of US progress on the complacency of the GCC countries is, therefore, from their perspective ludicrous.

Overall, the US under the Bush administration has lost a lot of credibility with the leadership of the GCC states, not to the point where the overall usefulness of the relationship has come into question but at least to where the individual leaders are beginning to think about and contemplate alternatives. It is in this context that the announcement of the \$ 20 billion weapons sales to the GCC states must also be understood. With the US pushing these sales when they know that the Gulf states are awash in cash, it appears as if weapons sales are the only medium left for the US to reassure its GCC allies about its commitment to the security of the region. That the region requires arms control agreements and weapons free zones instead of additional arms sales is not up for consideration.

It is no longer sufficient to argue that there have always been disagreements in US-GCC relations and the current slew of differences is a reflection of the inherent ups and downs in ties. The US insistence on seeing its policies in the Middle East and the Gulf enacted despite the lack of an overall strategic vision to these policies and their disregard for regional priorities and interests holds the potential for changing the nature of US-GCC relations. This

is not to say that a complete break is imminent but with US credibility at stake, it will take a supreme effort by the next US administration to repair the damage that has already been done.