

## HENRY SIEGMAN

President of the "U.S./Middle East Project" (USMEP). Research professor at the Sir Joseph Hotung Middle East Programme of the University of London

A central feature of the Gulf region has been its vulnerability to internal threats, particularly from Iraq and Iran, and its reliance on a U.S. security umbrella to counter those threats.

In the past, the Gulf states counted on Iraq to contain Iran, although Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed as much of a threat to them as did Iran. Thanks to the devastation the Bush administration has visited on Iraq, as it sought to bring it redemption, salvation, and the blessings of democracy, that country no longer poses a danger to its Arab neighbors in the Gulf (or at least does not pose the same danger; radical instability in Iraq would threaten the stability of its neighbors as well).

The destruction of Iraq has greatly increased the vulnerability of Gulf states to Iran's hegemonic ambitions, as has Iran's pursuit of a nuclear capacity. It is a vulnerability that is particularly pronounced for Saudi Arabia, with its oil and water installations located on Gulf coasts exposed to asymmetric warfare, as noted by Anthony Cordesman of the Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. At the same time, Bush's Iraqi misadventure has greatly diminished America's ability to project its power in the region and beyond, and therefore the reliability of its security umbrella for the Gulf.

The Bush administration has entertained a notion of a grand U.S.-Arab-Israeli alliance to contain Iran, based on the sectarian divide between Shiite Iran and mostly Arab Gulf States. That notion is seen in the Gulf as a dangerous fantasy, more likely to inflame Islamic radicalism and push Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon into even greater chaos rather than contain Iran.

Saudis see Iran as potentially a dangerous enemy. Depending on the day of the week or time of the day, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would like to see the U.S. remove that threat militarily. But it is a preference that on most other days and times is replaced by a deep fear that they would be the first to pay a terrible price for such an American (or Israeli) assault.

As Iran flexes its muscles, the threat it poses to existing Arab regimes in the Gulf is prompted less by religious sectarian differences than by more traditional national reasons, mainly Iran's historic insistence on a regional role that reflects its geographic, demographic and economic weight. Iran is not inherently a troublemaker, neither politically nor theologically. Its desire for a greater role and influence in the region and beyond is seen in the Gulf as something that creative diplomacy could channel along constructive lines that augment regional stability far more effectively than military confrontation would.

U.S. policy has assumed that its pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian peace would assuage the Arab street and enable an Israeli-Arab front against Iran. But the fatuousness of American peace efforts and their complete lack of evenhandedness only reinforced the conviction of the Arab street that the U.S. cannot be relied on to constrain Israeli territorial ambitions and prevent the dispossession of the Palestinian people.

The intensification of anti-American passion in the region no longer allows Arab regimes to maintain large concentrations of American troops on their soil to provide them with the needed protection. Reaching an accommodation with Iran is therefore seen as the only alternative, for Iran will remain their neighbor and influential regional power, while the reliability of the American security umbrella – on the ground or over the horizon – is increasingly in doubt.

Consequently, there is a new regional willingness to explore independent diplomatic initiatives, in sharp contrast to a previous pattern of leaving such initiatives entirely to the U.S., and following the American lead. Indeed, there is now even a readiness on the part of Gulf countries (and Arab countries in the larger region) to pursue initiatives that diverge



entirely from American policy, whether in Lebanon, where Qatar – acting on behalf of the Arab League – helped forge a government coalition that defied American efforts to isolate and marginalize Hezbollah, or the Saudi initiative to create a unity government that unites Hamas and Fatah. While that is an initiative that came to grief, it is likely to be revived, U.S. opposition notwithstanding.

These efforts, according to Rami Khouri, a sober and perceptive observer of the region, are an augury of new initiatives by local regional powers to settle their conflicts through compromise and diplomacy rather than conflict and war, or reliance on outside powers.

This new regional sensibility, one that stresses dialogue, greater tolerance of sectarian differences, and avoidance of military confrontation, stands in ironic contradistinction to the Bush administration's dominant political sensibility which, while seeking to promote democracy, shunned dialogue, downgraded diplomacy, and portrayed adversaries in absolutist ideological and religious categories, seeking instead to solve problems through military confrontation.

Yet, for all that has changed, the Gulf countries cannot do without a U.S. security umbrella, for they have not developed the capacity to provide for their own security. Despite the vast increases in arms purchases by the Gulf states – from the U.S. and other sources – and their constant talk about building up their internal capacity for coordinated security measures, they remain far short of that goal.

What is also needed are more effective policies to deal with the consequences of this continuing dependence. This would include governmental reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and real movement toward more participatory democracy. For all the talk about democratic reform, Gulf countries remain far short of the domestic changes necessary to achieve levels of internal balance and stability without which a viable foundation for regional security cannot exist.