

## Foreword

### *Conflicts in the Persian Gulf: Origins and Evolutions*

In 1947 with the communists on the march in Eastern Europe and civil war raging in Greece, the British government informed the Truman administration that it was no longer capable of defending Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean area. Without delay, President Truman summoned his advisors and after due consideration and debate they came out with the most revolutionary expansion of U.S. strategic interests. Earlier, America had declared the Western Hemisphere as a region of vital national interest (the Monroe Doctrine). Now for the first time in its history, the United States was looking at the other side of the world, declaring the security of Greece and Turkey of vital interest and committing to their defense. This became known as the Truman Doctrine. Since then, the United States has adopted a number of other doctrines pertaining to the Middle East—the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine, the Carter Doctrine, the Bush Doctrine—with varied degrees of success and failure.

The Truman Doctrine was without a doubt the most successful of these. With Greece and Turkey coming under the U.S. defense umbrella, and obvious that Iran under the Shah would be next in line. Although Iran was never mentioned in the Truman Doctrine it was understood by all powers that the United States would be committed to its defense, and it was inevitable that the Persian Gulf would also be included.

From the very beginning the U.S. objective was to keep the Persian Gulf in ‘friendly hands.’ The goal was to keep any hostile power out of the region. This included communist states or extreme nationalistic states such as Nasser’s Egypt. America wanted the Persian Gulf to be safe in support of Western economic and strategic interests. To a very large extent the U.S. succeeded in its quest. The Persian Gulf became the main supplier of oil to the Western industrial world as well as to the emerging markets. Under friendly regimes, strategic waterways such as the Suez Canal, Bab-ol-Mandab, and the Straits of Hormuz remained safe and open. But circumstances have evolved. The power

most hostile to the United States and to Western interests, namely Iran, cannot be kept out of the Persian Gulf. In fact, it is right in the center! What makes the situation even more unusual is the fact that Iran is the odd man out in the Persian Gulf.

Iran is the only non-Arab state in the region. Culturally and historically it has frosty relations with the Arab world. It is also the major Shiite country in the region. In fact, up to Saddam Hussein's overthrow it was the only Shiite-controlled country. It is also the largest country in terms of population. It has more people than all the other Persian Gulf states combined. Geographically it occupies the northern and eastern shores of the Persian Gulf and controls the Straits of Hormuz. All these facts make Iran the most powerful state in the Persian Gulf. But of course power is a relative term. Compared to U.S. forces in the region, Iran is weak. The military power of Iran is vastly exaggerated but compared to Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, and even Saudi Arabia, Iran is the power that Arabs fear the most.

Put another way, it is not that Iran is so strong but that the Arab states are so weak. There are many factors underlying their weakness. They are all artificial states. The oldest, Saudi Arabia, is of 1920 vintage. The rest came into existence as late as the 1960s and 1970s. None of them has much experience in self-governance. They were part of the Ottoman Empire and later the British Empire. And they are all tribal societies ruled by hereditary rulers—kings, sheiks, and emirs. There is little or no feeling of nationalism. They all fall under the Arab national umbrella, yet have disputes with one another. Saudi Arabia has border disputes with all its neighbors. Bahrain has disputes with Qatar, Qatar has disputes with the UAE and with Saudi Arabia. And of course Kuwait has an existential dispute with Iraq. These and more disputes are thoroughly discussed in these pages. Cooperation among the Arab states is difficult. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is nothing but a Saudi invention to save its influence in the region and to try to contain Iran. But Iran's threat to these states is not military. It has no territorial dispute of any significance with any of its neighbors. The dispute with the UAE, or more precisely with Sharja over Abu Moussa, is for all practical purposes over. As Teddy Roosevelt said of the Panama Canal, the Shah stole the islands "fair and square." As Professor Askari

points out, the threat to the Arab states is internal. The first cause of concern is the composition of their populations. Without exception, all are heavily dependent on foreign workers. In some, as in Qatar, the UAE, and even Kuwait, there are more ex-pats than indigenous people. This has implications. The loyalty of these workers is very much in doubt and they resent their treatment. Even their security forces have large numbers of foreign personnel. The air force of some of these countries—the UAE, Qatar, and to some extent Saudi Arabia—have employed foreign pilots, largely Pakistanis. The oil sector, which is the backbone of their economies, is almost entirely run by non-Arabs. The rulers are fully aware of this fact and have undertaken measures to remedy the situation by training more indigenous technical people. Still there are more students in Saudi Arabia doing Koranic studies than engineering. It will be a long time before these states can be self-reliant.

The very foundation of these Arab countries is under question. Tribal societies and hereditary rulers do not fit well with the twenty-first century and with Arab aspirations. The two largest states—Iran and Iraq—are essentially against monarchy and are run by Shiites whom some Sunni rulers of the region do not even consider Muslims. The Shiite influence in the Persian Gulf states is of great concern. In this book, the religious conflict is well documented and discussed. All these states have major Shiite minorities, but what is even more critical for the rulers is the fact that Shiites populate all the major oil producing regions. The most recent Shiite uprising was in Bahrain, the home of the U.S. fifth fleet, where in fact Shiites are the majority. In order to save the Sunni regime the Saudis had to intervene militarily to restore order. The situation, however, is still fluid and far from over. Shiites in Kuwait—the most democratic state in the Persian Gulf—are even causing problems. The Kuwaiti parliament has seldom managed to complete its term without being dissolved by the ruling family. There is demand for more participation and less royal rule in all these countries. But there are problems even within the ruling families. The current ruler of Qatar overthrew his own father and King Faisal pushed his brother aside in Saudi Arabia. The most important of these countries, Saudi Arabia, has been ruled by the Al-Saud family since its creation. It is the only country in the world that is named after a ruling family. Because of its vast wealth and small

population it has up to now managed to survive by buying the loyalty of its citizens, but the situation is becoming more difficult by the day. The population is growing at a faster pace than are the country's resources! As a result of the improvement in education and technology people are more aware of the outside world and are less willing to be ruled by 'bread' alone. Interestingly, as the Arab Spring unfolded with the overthrow of governments in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, the ruling Al-Sauds announced multi-billion dollar handouts to citizens. Up to now the family has more or less kept its cohesion. But there are constant rumors of disputes within the family. King Abdullah and his Crown Prince are both old and not in good health and they are among the last sons of King Abdul Aziz. It will soon be the turn of Abdul-Aziz's grandchildren who are if anything numerous. Not all of them have political ambitions but many who do are not in agreement with how the kingdom should be governed. Most have received education in Western universities and may want to modernize the system by loosening religious controls. That may be the end of Saudi Arabia as we know it. In de Tocqueville's words, "The Reformist Monarch is the Last Monarch." A good example is the Shah of Iran. Should anything happen in Saudi Arabia it will have far-reaching implications for all the GCC states. And what the future holds for Western interests in the region is far from certain. The dependence of the outside world on the Persian Gulf is obvious and extremely well documented in Professor Askari's book. This dependence will continue for some time.

It is often said that the United States will be energy independent in ten years. This may be true but it does not reduce the importance of the Persian Gulf. China, India, Western Europe, and emerging markets all look to the Persian Gulf for oil. China, the main rival of the United States, is interested not only in Persian Gulf oil, but in oil wherever it can be found, in Latin America, Canada, Africa, and Asia. Its thirst for oil has no limit. This fact alone would make the Persian Gulf of strategic interest for the United States. The control of the Straits of Hormuz will remain of vital concern for the United States regardless of its dependence on oil.

It may be a cliché to say that the Persian Gulf is in a period of transition, but this is true nevertheless. As pointed out in this timely book, hereditary rulers cannot continue to rule forever. The many reasons are discussed in great detail. This book is a 'must read' for all those who are interested not only in oil but in the political and economic future of the Persian Gulf.

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