



The International Politics of the Gulf

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Overview

The international politics of the Gulf region are defined by the interplay of the local states and outside powers—primarily, in recent decades, the United States. The local states do not simply deal with each other on the basis of balance-of-power concerns, although those concerns are certainly present. With Arab nationalist, Islamic, and ethnic identities transcending Gulf borders, domestic security and stability concerns are as important in the foreign policies of the region's states towards each other and outside powers. The Gulf's strategic role as the source of 60 per cent of the world's known petroleum reserves has given it enduring importance in global US strategy. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Washington took an increasingly direct military and political role there, culminating with the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. However, the failure of the US to create a stable Iraqi regime and the still uncertain impact of the Arab uprisings highlight the local obstacles to outside power hegemony in the region, even if the would-be hegemon were the most powerful country in the world. The agreement reached between Iran and the major world powers in July 2015 after years of negotiation has the potential of ushering a new, less confrontational phase in the international politics of the Gulf in addition to instituting significant checks on Iranian nuclear activities. However, the hostility displayed towards the deal by veteran American allies Saudi Arabia and Israel highlights how the path to more cooperative relations between the two shores of the Gulf, let alone in the wider Middle East, is still bedevilled by a lack of mutual trust.

Introduction

Two almost contemporaneous events in the early 1970s created the international politics of the Persian/Arabian Gulf region (see **Figure 14.1**) as we know them today: the British withdrawal of its protectorate over the Arab states of the lower Gulf; and the dramatic increase in world oil prices. The Gulf had an important role in British imperial strategy from the outset of the nineteenth century, reinforced in the early twentieth century by the increasing importance of oil. The oil resources of the region made it important to both superpowers in the Cold War. The regional states all had 'open files' of contentious issues among them, including, but not limited to, border disputes. However, the early 1970s marks a dramatic change in the structure of power in the area.

Before that time, the states of the region were limited in their abilities to project their power and influence beyond their borders, and checked by what remained of British power in the area. After that time, the three major regional states—Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—all had vastly increased amounts of military and economic power. Their foreign policies became much more ambitious. At the same time, the restraint of great power presence in the area was removed, at least temporarily. Britain had left; the United States, mired in Vietnam and unwilling to take on new obligations, did not 'fill the vacuum'. The field was open for the regional states to take more forward and aggressive roles.

To some extent, these new ambitions on the part of the regional powers can be understood in classical realist, balance-of-power terms. However, classical realism and balance-of-power politics do not provide a perfect template for understanding the Gulf regional system; they are necessary, but not sufficient. The security agenda in the Gulf is complicated by the fact that the local states were, at the same time as they were competing with each other

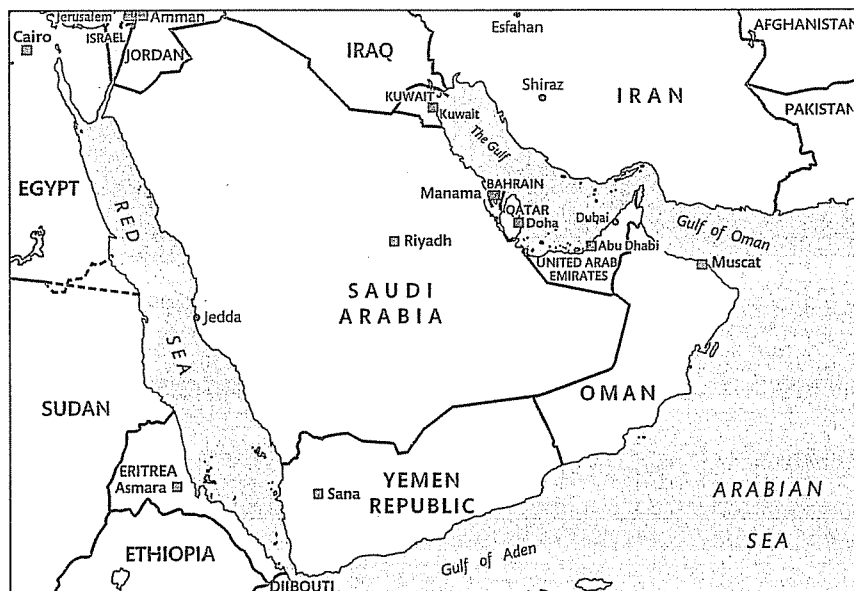


Figure 14.1 The Gulf states

for power regionally, also confronting difficult domestic issues of state-building. The social dislocations brought on by great oil wealth brought down the Shah's regime in Iran. Centrifugal forces threatened the integrity of the Iraqi state at various times, up to the present. The Gulf monarchies were buffeted by challenges to their domestic stability. The importance of transnational identities in the Gulf states exacerbated the sense of threat that rulers faced. Baathist Iraq's Arab nationalism was deployed at various times to encourage opposition to rulers in Iran (in Khuzestan) and the Gulf monarchies. Revolutionary Shia Islam was an important threat to domestic stability in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia. Iran's influence in post-Saddam Iraq is more the product of its close ties with Iraqi Shia groups than its military power. Kurdish identity cuts across the Iran-Iraq border, and was exploited by one regime to pressure another on various occasions.

So it is not simply the balancing of power, or the desire to extend one's power internationally, that has driven calculations of war and alliance in the Gulf. Threats are not simply military; they are also political. The Shah and the ayatollahs governed the same country, but the Arab states have viewed the nature of the threat emanating from different Iranian regimes in very different ways. Whether the Gulf states have viewed Iraq as a threat or a protector had more to do with their perceptions of Iraqi intentions towards their regimes than with estimates of Iraqi military power. Regime security—the ability of the ruling elites to stay in power domestically—was as important, if not more important, in determining foreign-policy choices than more traditional state security concerns, and the Arab uprisings have served to highlight this further.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate these points within a long time frame by considering two sets of issues: first, Iraqi war decisions, in 1980 and 1990, and also in 1975 (the Algiers agreement), when Iraq chose not to go to war, and in 1991, when Iraq chose not to withdraw from Kuwait in the face of superior power and almost certain defeat; and second, the different alliance choices made by Saudi Arabia at various times since 1971 in regional politics.

The regional security picture is not complete, however, without consideration of a third issue: the changes in US policy towards the region. US interest in the Gulf has been a constant, because of the strategic importance of oil, but the tactics that the US has pursued have changed significantly over time. These changes have brought the US into a much more direct role in the security picture of the Gulf from the late 1980s, constraining the freedom of action that the local states had enjoyed. However, the US's inability to create a stable post-Saddam regime increased Iran's relative power in the region and created a new arena of regional rivalry, with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, and other countries jockeying for influence in a weakened and fragmented Iraq. This rivalry, in turn, has been conditioned by the Arab uprisings that commenced at the end of 2010 and led to further fragmentation in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The US military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 opened a new chapter in Iraq's history, but given the heightened regional instability has hardly reduced the role of regional powers in its politics.

The above picture could definitely change if relations between Iran, the foremost regional power, and the United States, the over the horizon balancer, were to normalize in the wake of an agreement to regulate Iranian nuclear ambitions. A detailed preliminary agreement between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, the so called P5+1, and Iran was reached in November 2013 and a formal declaration on the parameters of a formal agreement was signed in Lausanne on 2 April 2015 (Sick 2015.) These

negotiations have been carefully presented as separate from the issue of US–Iran relations but a lifting of sanctions directed at the Iranian economy and a permanent deal over the Iranian nuclear programme would undoubtedly lead to a lessening of tensions between these two key actors and are fiercely resisted by the two stalwart American allies in the region: Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Regime security, political identity, and Iraqi War decisions

In both 1980 and 1990, the regime of Saddam Hussein launched wars against foes who were, or who seemed to be, considerably weaker than Iraq. It is tempting to conclude that the ambitious Iraqi president attacked a militarily weakened Iran and a practically defenceless Kuwait because he thought that he would win. Undoubtedly, the prospect for victory was an important element in Saddam's war calculations. However, the sequence of events and evidence from Iraqi sources indicate that these war decisions were driven as much, if not more, by fears about the prospects for regime security within Iraq itself—fears that were based on a belief that outside actors could manipulate Iraqi domestic politics against the Baathist regime. In each case, also, Iraqi calculations about the prospects of victory were inflated by the belief that the invasion would be met with at least some support both in the target state and in the larger region. Transnational connections inspired both the fears and hopes that lay behind the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88 and the First Gulf War of 1990–91 (Gause 2002b).

The Iran–Iraq War 1980–1988

The Iranian revolution is the starting point for understanding the Iraqi war decision of 1980. The Shah's Iran and Baathist Iraq were never on particularly good terms. There were border crises between the countries in 1969 and 1975. The 1975 crisis led to the Algiers agreement, signed by then Vice-President Saddam Hussein and the Shah at an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) meeting in the Algerian capital. Iraq agreed to accept the Iranian definition of their common border along the Shatt al-Arab river; in turn, Iran ceased supporting the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion that was raging in northern Iraq. While not close, relations between the two states after 1975 were not overtly hostile.

The weakening of Iran in conventional power terms, which began in late 1977 as the revolutionary movement gathered steam, did not immediately excite Iraqi ambitions. On the contrary, Baghdad expelled Ayatollah Khomeini from Iraq in October 1978 and engaged in security consultations with the Shah's government. When the monarchical regime fell in February 1979, Iraq's first reactions were mildly welcoming to the new regime. Relations soon deteriorated, however. In June 1979, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a major Iraqi Shi'i religious leader, was arrested on the eve of a scheduled trip to Tehran. Violent demonstrations ensued in Iraqi Shi'i areas. Several prominent Iranian ayatollahs, including Khomeini, condemned the Iraqi regime as 'despotic' and 'criminal', warning Iraq's rulers of 'the wrath of God and the anger of the Muslim people' (Menashri 1990: 101). Border clashes in the Kurdish areas ensued. In July 1979, Mas'ud and 'Idris Barazani, the sons of Iraqi Kurdish leader Mustafa Barazani, crossed the border into Iran and received support from the revolutionary government (Hiro 1991: 35).

In the midst of these events, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq on 16 July 1979. An explanation that focused purely upon Saddam's ambitions would expect a militant change in Iraqi policy towards Iran from that time. That did not happen. On the contrary, the two governments sought in the short term to de-escalate tensions and border skirmishes subsided. This did not, however, lead to any lessening of political ferment among Iraq's Shia majority. In July 1979, while under house arrest, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr called for violent opposition to the regime. Shortly thereafter, the major Iraqi Shi'i political groups announced the formation of the 'Islamic Liberation Movement', ready to 'resort to all means' to bring down the Baathist regime. In October 1979, the Organization of the Iraqi 'Ulama declared its support for the use of violence against the government. Al-Da'wa, the major Iraqi Shi'i party, formed a military wing by the end of the year (Wiley 1992: 54-5; Tripp 2000: 229). In May 1980, the Iraqi interior minister told an interviewer that, while there were fewer than 1,000 members of al-Da'wa, 'the number of misguided supporters and religious sympathizers is considerable' (Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)-MEA-80-097, 16 May 1980: E2).

Against this rising tide of Shia opposition in late 1979, Iranian politics took a militant turn. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan resigned in November 1979, in the wake of the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran. Statements about the need to export the Iranian revolutionary model around the region became more frequent, and by 1980 there were explicit calls by Iranian government officials for the Iraqi people to overthrow the Baath regime (Chubin and Tripp 1988: 34; Khadduri 1988: 82; Menashri 1990: 157-8). On 1 April 1980, a member of one of the Shia opposition groups attempted to kill Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. During the funeral procession for some of those killed in that attempt, according to the Iraqi media, a bomb was thrown from a window of an 'Iranian school' in Baghdad (FBIS-MEA-80-068, 7 April 1980: E5-7). In retaliation, the Iraqi government executed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and began to expel tens of thousands of Iraqi Shia of Iranian origin from the country.

These events were the final straw for Saddam Hussein. He began to threaten Iran in the most obvious way. By late July 1980, Saddam was all but promising a war: 'We are not the kind of people to bow to Khomeini. He wagered to bend us and we wagered to bend him. We will see who will bend the other' (FBIS-MEA-80-144, 24 July 1980: E4-5). When news of Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr's execution reached Iran, in mid-April 1980, the Iranian reaction matched the hostility now being exhibited by Saddam. Ayatollah Khomeini reiterated his previous calls to the Iraqi people and the Iraqi army to overthrow the regime, accusing the Baath of launching a 'war against Islam' (Hiro 1991: 35). Border clashes resumed.

Sources that have reported on the timing of the Iraqi decision to go to war almost unanimously place the decision in the spring of 1980, after the events of April (Gause 2002b: 68). The gap between the war decision and the actual initiation of conflict in September 1980 is attributable to two factors: the first is planning and organization, which would take some months to achieve; the second is the effort by Iranian exiles in Iraq to organize a military coup to overthrow the Islamic regime in Tehran. That effort was fully supported by Iraq and planned on Iraqi territory. Begun on 9 July 1980, it was a spectacular and immediate failure (Gasiorowski 2002). The failure of the coup was confirmation of the durability of the Islamic revolutionary regime.

The Iraqi war decision of 1980 is best explained by the change in Saddam Hussein's framing of the issue of how to deal with Iran. With the changes in Iran after November 1979 and the more open calls for the export of the Islamic revolution, domestic unrest in Iraq came to be seen as orchestrated by Tehran. Saddam's regime could only look forward to further Iranian efforts to foment revolution against it, if nothing changed in Tehran. Facing that prospect, Saddam chose the risky path of war. He certainly thought that he and Iraq would gain by victory, but the elements that made victory likely had been in place for some time. What had changed was his belief that a continuation of the status quo would only bring him more domestic problems.

Iraq's attack on Iran was spectacularly unsuccessful, both in destabilizing the revolutionary regime in Tehran and in securing Iraqi control of south-western Iran. By the summer of 1982, Iranian counter-attacks had driven Iraqi forces out of Iranian territory. The Khomeini regime was then faced with a decision: declare victory over Iraq and accept a ceasefire, or continue the war in Iraqi territory. Ayatollah Khomeini decided the issue with a call to continue the war until the downfall of the Baathist regime in Baghdad. Tehran hoped that an effort to spread the Islamic revolution would be met with support among the Iraqi Shia. That support was not forthcoming in any substantial way. The war dragged on for six more years. During most of that time, Iran was on the offensive and made occasional, limited gains, but was unable to break the Iraqi forces. Iraq turned the tide in 1988, recapturing lost territory in southern Iraq and demoralizing Iran with missile attacks on Tehran. From 1987, the US navy became directly involved in the war, protecting oil tankers from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against Iranian attack. After a US naval vessel had shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in July 1988, Iran accepted UN Security Council Resolution 598, calling for a ceasefire. Khomeini likened this decision to 'drinking poison', but even he had become convinced that Iran could not win the war. Eight years of bloody war, with hundreds of thousands of casualties on each side, ended with the two sides basically in the same position as they had been when the war had begun.

The Gulf War 1990-1991

Establishing with certainty when Saddam Hussein decided to attack Kuwait is a difficult task. There are indications from Iraqi sources that the decision was made only a few months before the actual invasion (Gause 2002b: 53-4). No source that refers specifically to the timing of the decision places it earlier than the spring of 1990. The haste with which the decision was made was reflected indirectly in some of the (very mild) self-criticism exercised by Iraqi leaders after the invasion. At a meeting of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council and Baath party leadership on 24 January 1991, Taha Yasin Ramadan told his colleagues:

I am not saying that August 2, 1990 [the date of the attack] was the best day for the mother of battles. We had not studied the situation for a year, or even for months, preparing for the mother of battles. But it was the will of God that decided the date.

(al-Bazzaz 1996: 200)

There is every indication that the decision to invade Kuwait was made relatively shortly before the invasion, under feelings of time pressure. What had happened to trigger it?

Saddam Hussein's regime made it clear, before and after the invasion, that it saw an international conspiracy against it, meant to weaken Iraq internationally and to destabilize it domestically. Its economic problems were blamed on lower oil prices, which were in turn blamed on 'overproduction' by Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), clients of the US. Small shifts in US policy (such as limits on US credits for Iraqi purchases of US rice exports and Congressional resolutions condemning Iraq for human rights violations) and damaging revelations (such as Iraq's use of the Atlanta branch of an Italian bank to launder arms purchase money) after the end of the Iran-Iraq War were read as evidence that the US had adopted a hostile attitude towards Iraq. Media attention to the Iraqi nuclear programme, and subsequent British and US efforts to block the export of dual-use technology to Iraq, were seen as part of a concerted effort to weaken Iraq.

Lurking behind many of these efforts, in the Iraqi view, was Israel, seen to be preparing for a strike on the Iraqi nuclear establishment similar to the one it had conducted in 1981 (Baram 1993; Freedman and Karsh 1993: chs 2-3; Heikal 1993: 158-231). Wafiq al-Samara'i, then deputy director of Iraqi military intelligence, says that, at the beginning of 1990, his office began receiving warnings from Saddam about Israeli plans to strike at Iraqi nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons facilities (al-Samara'i 1997: 365). Sa'ad al-Bazzaz, editor at the time of a major Baghdad daily newspaper, reports that the Iraqi leadership fully expected an Israeli military attack at some time in August 1990 (al-Bazzaz 1993: 345).

Saddam himself bluntly described this 'conspiracy' in March 1990:

America is coordinating with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and Kuwait in a conspiracy against us. They are trying to reduce the price of oil to affect our military industries and our scientific research; to force us to reduce the size of our armed forces. ... You must expect from another direction an Israeli military airstrike, or more than one, to destroy some of our important targets as part of this conspiracy.

(al-Samara'i 1997: 222-3)

There was also an internal aspect to the Iraqi regime's fears. In either late 1988 or early 1989, scores of officers were arrested and executed on the charge of conspiring to bring down the government. Hundreds of high-ranking officers indirectly connected to the accused were forced to retire (Baram 1993: 8; al-Bazzaz 1996: 36-7, 89-90; al-Samara'i 1997: 184-5; Tripp 2000: 249-50). Iraqi ruling circles came to believe during 1989 that a number of foreign powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US, were attempting to infiltrate Iraqi society to collect intelligence and to pressure the government (al-Bazzaz 1993: 159-60, 210-13). Other sources report a failed coup attempt in September 1989 and the exposure of a coup attempt, coupled with a plan to assassinate Saddam, in January 1990 (Freedman and Karsh 1993: 29-30; al-Samara'i 1997: 185; Baram 1997: 5-6).

While Saddam Hussein increasingly saw his domestic political and economic situation in 1989 deteriorate, events in the larger world reinforced his growing sense of crisis. The fall of the Soviet client states in Eastern Europe increased his fears about the future of his own regime (al-Bazzaz 1993: 392). Saddam's sense that international and regional forces were conspiring with his domestic opponents against him had reached the point that, in October 1989, Tariq Aziz raised this issue in a meeting with Secretary of State Baker in Washington (Baker 1995: 265).

By early 1990, Saddam Hussein was convinced that his regime was being targeted. This belief was reflected in the changes in his rhetoric and the tone of Iraqi foreign policy. In February 1990, Saddam launched an attack on the US military presence in the Gulf at the founding summit of the Arab Cooperation Council and devoted much of the speech to criticism of Israel (Bengio 1992: 37–49). This was followed by Saddam's threat in April 1990 to 'burn half of Israel' if the Israelis attacked Iraq. The rhetorical temperature escalated from there. At the same time, Iraqi rhetoric towards Kuwait and the other Gulf states hardened, and in January 1990 Iraq first proposed that Kuwait 'loan' it US\$10 billion, as well as write off Iraqi debts incurred during the war with Iran (Heikal 1993: 209). At the Arab summit of May 1990, Saddam likened overproduction of OPEC quotas to an act of war against Iraq (Freedman and Karsh 1993: 46–8).

This shift in Iraqi foreign policy came when Saddam concluded that there were international efforts afoot to destabilize him domestically (al-Bazzaz 1996: 198–9, 227–8). It culminated with the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. Saddam's unwillingness to accept a negotiated solution to the Kuwait crisis—which would have required him to withdraw from Kuwait, but would have spared his country and military the devastating attack by US and coalition forces—provides further evidence for the hypothesis that it was fear of domestic destabilization that was the most important factor prompting his decision to invade.

The Iraqi leadership did not believe that withdrawal from Kuwait would end what it saw as the international conspiracy against it. On the eve of the ground war, after enduring a month of air attacks, Saddam told Soviet envoy Yevgeny Primakov: 'If America decided on war it will go to war whether I withdraw from Kuwait or not. They were conspiring against us. They are targeting the leadership for assassination. What have the Iraqis lost? They might yet gain!' (al-Bazzaz 1993: 399). After the war, Tariq Aziz was asked on the PBS documentary *The Gulf War* why Iraq did not withdraw when defeat seemed inevitable. He replied: 'Iraq was designated by George Bush for destruction, with or without Kuwait. Inside Kuwait or outside Kuwait. Before the 2nd of August or after the 2nd of August.'¹

The contrast with Iraqi acceptance of the Algiers agreement in 1975 is instructive. Then, Saddam Hussein believed that retreat internationally would strengthen the regime's domestic position; Saddam's belief that withdrawal from Kuwait in 1991 would not end the pressures on his domestic position emanating from abroad explains the different outcome in 1991. The Gulf War ended with Iraq's defeat on the battlefield, its humiliating withdrawal from Kuwait, and US dominance of the Gulf. However, for over a decade Saddam Hussein claimed victory in what Iraq termed the 'mother of battles' because his regime remained in power after the war.

Regime security, regional balancing, and Saudi Arabian alliance decisions

The importance of domestic regime security concerns in the foreign policies of Gulf states is highlighted by the alliance choices of Saudi Arabia during (and after) the different Gulf wars. Saudi manoeuvring between Iraq and Iran during the 1980s was dictated more by the

ideological threat posed by the Iranian revolution than by balance-of-power concerns. The different Saudi reactions during the first and second Gulf Wars reflects the level of threat—both military and ideological—posed by Saddam Hussein's regime to the Saudi leadership and by the different public opinion reactions in Saudi Arabia to US military moves against Iraq. While the Saudis acted in both cases within the broad confines of their long-standing security relationship with the US, in the first they cooperated enthusiastically and publicly with the US military; in the second, their cooperation was much less extensive and largely hidden from their population.

Saudi Arabia and the Iran-Iraq War

The Iranian revolution changed the strategic picture dramatically for the Saudis. The new Islamic Republican government presented an open challenge to the legitimacy and stability of the Saudi regime, both as an example of Islamic revolution, and as a promoter of discontent within Saudi Arabia and the other monarchical states of the Gulf. A wave of unrest, concentrated mostly in Shi'i communities, swept Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia from 1978 through 1980 (Ramazani 1986: 39–40; Kostiner 1987: 179). The revolutionaries in Tehran continued to challenge the al-Saud's Islamic credentials through the 1980s. Central to this challenge was Iranian behaviour during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Iranian pilgrims held political demonstrations, forbidden by the Saudi authorities, during the 1982 and 1983 pilgrimages. In 1987, Saudi security forces clashed with Iranian pilgrims, resulting in more than 400 deaths. In contrast, during the 1980s Saddam Hussein's Iraq assiduously courted the Saudis, emphasizing their common interest in checking the Iranian threat.

The beginning of the Iran-Iraq War presented the Saudis with a serious dilemma. They were concerned about the ultimate intentions of Saddam Hussein. However, forced to choose between the two combatants, Saudi Arabia aligned with Iraq. When the war started, Saudi Arabia permitted Iraqi planes to use Saudi bases and Saudi ports were opened for the trans-shipment of goods to Iraq (Safran 1986: 369). Contemporary sources report substantial Saudi financial aid to Iraq in 1980 and 1981 (Nonneman 1986: 96–7). Once Iranian forces had entered Iraqi territory in 1982, Saudi support became more substantial. Billions of dollars of Saudi financial support helped Iraq to fund the war. That support, as detailed by King Fahd, included direct aid, loans, military equipment, and the sale of oil from the Saudi-Kuwaiti neutral zone, with profits going to Iraq, theoretically as a 'loan'. (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 January 1991: 4.) After Syria had cut the Iraqi oil pipeline to the Mediterranean in 1982, the Saudis permitted Iraq to build a pipeline into the kingdom, connecting to an existing Saudi line from the Gulf to the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia also publicly supported Iraq in various diplomatic forums.

The Saudis exploited the opportunities that the Iran-Iraq War presented. With Iran and Iraq consumed by their war, and the smaller states exposed to the myriad threats that war presented, the Saudis were able to organize under the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The Council brought together the smaller monarchies (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) under Saudi leadership and has proved to be one of the region's most successful regional groupings.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf War

With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Saudi threat perception changed dramatically. Iraq was now an immediate military threat, moving troops up to the border of the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. It was also an ideological/domestic threat to the Saudi regime: Iraq had overthrown a fellow monarchy. Iraq called openly, on both Islamic and Arab nationalist bases, for citizens in Saudi Arabia to revolt against their government. One Iraqi source reported that Saddam was confident that this propaganda barrage would destabilize the Saudi domestic scene so thoroughly that Riyadh would have no choice but to accept the new realities (al-Bazzaz 1996: 112).

The dire threat posed by Iraq, on both balance-of-power and regime security levels, led the Saudis to overcome their hesitations about an open military alliance with the US. Riyadh had preferred to keep the US military 'over the horizon', worried that too public an embrace of the US could lead to a domestic and regional public opinion backlash. The Saudis now chose to run the risk of alienating their own public and welcomed hundreds of thousands of US soldiers into the kingdom.

With the success of the US campaign to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait, a new period in US-Saudi relations began. Riyadh was much more willing to cooperate openly with the US military, allowing it to use Saudi bases throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s to patrol the 'no-fly' zone in southern Iraq. This seemingly permanent US military presence excited domestic political opposition. It was one of the prime complaints levelled by Osama bin Laden against the Saudi rulers. American facilities were attacked in Saudi Arabia in November 1995 in Riyadh and in June 1996 in the Eastern Province. The former attack killed five Americans; the latter killed nineteen and wounded hundreds.

As the Saudis continued to see Saddam Hussein as a major threat after the first Gulf War, their relations with Iran slowly began to improve. This trend was facilitated by changes in Iran itself. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 dissipated some of the fervour to 'export' the revolution, reducing at least one element of the threat that the Saudis perceived from Iran. The collapse of oil prices in the mid-1990s brought Riyadh and Tehran closer together, as they cooperated within OPEC and with major non-OPEC producers to push prices up. Riyadh still looked upon Tehran with suspicion, both as an ideological competitor in the Muslim world and as a major regional power. Tehran was equally mistrustful of Saudi-US relations, which it saw in the context of Washington's anti-Iranian policy. However, the hard edge of ideological hostility that characterized relations in the 1980s had been replaced by more normal and business-like ties in the 1990s.

Saudi Arabia and the Iraq War 2003

Riyadh was much less willing to cooperate with the US in its attack on Iraq in 2003 than it was in 1990-91. The Saudis officially opposed the US war. US ground troops and air forces were not permitted to use Saudi bases, with some exceptions that the Saudi government kept secret from its own population. The Saudi hesitancy to be publicly linked to this US attack on Iraq stemmed from two factors: first, Saddam Hussein was not nearly the threat to the Saudi rulers that he had been in 1990; and second, Saudi public opinion had taken a dramatic

anti-American turn. However, the Saudi rulers also did not want to alienate their US allies, whom they continued to see as their long-term security guarantors. The Saudis therefore cooperated with Washington militarily when such cooperation could be kept removed from the glare of publicity.

Saudi public opinion, by the beginning of 2003, was extremely anti-American. The upsurge in Israeli–Palestinian violence in the second intifada, which began in the autumn of 2000, was one factor increasing the level of anti-Americanism in the kingdom. The US reaction to the attacks of 11 September 2001 ('9/11') was another. The debate in the US over Saudi complicity in the attack was seen by many in Saudi Arabia as an attack on their country and their religion. The Saudi response in the immediate aftermath, on both the governmental and popular levels, was defensive and hostile to the US. The US attack on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was depicted by many in Saudi Arabia as a superpower attack on a defenceless civilian population. A Gallup poll, conducted in late January–early February 2002, reported that 64 per cent of Saudi respondents viewed the US either very unfavourably or most unfavourably. Fewer than 10 per cent saw the US as either friendly or trustworthy (Burkholder 2002). A Zogby International poll conducted in February–March 2003 found that 95 per cent of the Saudis polled had either a very unfavourable or a somewhat unfavourable attitude towards the US (Zogby 2003).

In the face of this considerable public opinion rejection of US policy in the region and without the perception of an immediate threat from Saddam Hussein, the Saudi leadership made every effort to separate itself publicly from US policy towards Iraq. However, the importance of the Saudi–US security relationship was such that Riyadh sought to cooperate with Washington where that cooperation could be kept out of their public's eye. The Saudis increased oil production in the lead-up to the war, to try to prevent price spikes. They permitted the US to coordinate air attacks on Iraq from the command-and-control centre at Prince Sultan Airbase south of Riyadh. They allowed US special forces access to an isolated Saudi base in the north-west corner of the country, near the Iraqi border (Allen and Khalaf 2003; C. S. Smith 2003a).

The Saudis walked a tightrope in the second Gulf War, trying to do enough to keep Washington happy, but not so much as to alienate their own public. It was a tightrope that they had walked successfully before. The interesting point about their behaviour in this episode was not their cooperation with Washington, which could have been expected from both their long-standing ties with the US and their hostility to Saddam Hussein; rather, it was the way in which Saudi public opinion put serious limits on the extent of that cooperation. Saudi anti-Americanism in this episode was based, at least in part, on transnational Arab and Muslim ideological solidarity with Palestinians and Iraqis.

US policy in the Gulf

For the US, the strategic significance of the Gulf region has been a constant since the Second World War because of its oil resources. During the period between the end of the Second World War and 1971, the US developed close political, economic, and military relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, to safeguard its interests and to check the possibilities of Soviet moves in the area. Since the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, US policy in the region has gone through a number of stages, reflecting changes in the US itself, in the Gulf, and

in the world economic and strategic picture. Those stages have seen progressively greater US military involvement in the area, culminating in the second Gulf War of 2003.

The 1970s: oil revolution and the twin-pillar policy

The end of British military responsibilities in the smaller Gulf states in 1971 could have been an opening for the US to take on the British mantle directly, as it had in many other parts of the region since the Second World War. However, the British withdrawal occurred at the height of US involvement in Vietnam, and there was no public or Congressional support for new foreign military obligations. Washington sought to safeguard its interests in the Gulf by supporting the military build-up of its two local allies, Iran and Saudi Arabia (Gause 1985: 258–66). The Soviet Union responded by signing a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Iraq in 1972, providing a Cold War justification for continued US military support for the 'twin pillars' of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The oil revolution of the early 1970s, culminating in the Saudi-led embargo by many Arab states of the sale of oil to the US in 1973–74 (in reaction to US support for Israel in the 1973 Arab–Israeli War), could have been seen as a direct challenge to the US 'twin pillar' policy in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia led the embargo against the US. Iran took advantage of the situation to push oil prices to their highest levels in history. By the time the dust had settled, oil prices had increased from around US\$3 per barrel to more than US\$12 per barrel, sending the US and much of the rest of the world into a recession that lasted through the decade. Paradoxically, the oil revolution strengthened the 'twin pillar' policy. The importance of the Gulf region for US foreign policy increased dramatically, but Washington was unable to take a direct military role there. With vast new oil revenues, Iran and Saudi Arabia were able drastically to increase their military spending, with most of their purchases coming from the US. The 1970s saw an intensification of military, economic, and political relations between the US and its Gulf partners (Safran 1986: ch. 12; Bill 1988: ch. 6).

The Iranian revolution and the Iran–Iraq War

The US 'twin pillar' policy in the Gulf came crashing down in 1979, as the Islamic revolution swept the Shah of Iran from power. The new Islamic Republic of Iran was intensely hostile towards the US—a hostility both signified and magnified by the Iranian hostage crisis. From November 1979 to January 1981, Iranian revolutionaries, with the support of Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, detained US diplomatic personnel in Iran. President Jimmy Carter attempted to free the hostages through a military raid in April 1980, which failed spectacularly, pointing to the weakness of the US military position in the area. Almost contemporaneously with the hostage crisis, in December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to prop up a failing communist regime there. The Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the subsequent Iraqi attack on Iran in September 1980 all further destabilized the world oil market, with oil prices increasing to over US\$30 per barrel in 1980–81.

The US reaction to this set of strategic challenges was to reconfirm its commitment to its remaining Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia, and to commit more US military resources to the Gulf. President Carter declared that the US would use all of the military means at its disposal

to confront any 'hostile power' trying to dominate the region. The Reagan administration, coming to power in January 1981, vastly increased the US military budget, fleshing out operationally the ambitious plans laid out at the end of the Carter administration for a 'Central Command' devoted to the Gulf region. Over intense Congressional objections, it sold airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft to Saudi Arabia in 1981. The Reagan administration also continued efforts begun by Carter to negotiate basing rights in the region, most notably with Oman. Other Gulf states were more reluctant in the early 1980s to open their territory to the US military (Kupchan 1987: chs 4–6).

While the US increased its regional military capabilities in the early and mid-1980s, it did not find it necessary to use them, even though war raged between Iraq and Iran. Although the fortunes of war ebbed and flowed, neither side achieved a military breakthrough that might have drastically altered the regional power situation. Moreover, the price of oil, after spiking to more than US\$40 per barrel at the beginning of the war, began to decline markedly from 1982. In 1986, prices briefly fell below US\$10 per barrel, less in real terms than they had been before the 1973 oil price revolution. With the war generally stalemated and oil prices declining, the US saw no need for direct military intervention in the region.

From 1982, when Iraqi forces withdrew from Iran and the Iranians took the fight across the border into Iraq, Washington began to support Iraq directly. The US shared intelligence with Baghdad, encouraged (or did not discourage) allies from supplying Iraq with weapons, sold Iraq 'dual use' technologies such as helicopters, and extended economic credits for the Iraqi purchase of US agricultural goods (Jentleson 1994: ch 1). In 1985–86, the Reagan administration also conducted secret diplomacy with Iran in what became known as the 'Iran contra scandal'. The US arranged for Israeli arms to be sold to Iran, in an effort to secure the release of US hostages from Lebanon and channel funding to the US-supported Nicaraguan opposition forces, the 'contras'. Some in the administration hoped that this opening would lead to a renewal of a strategic partnership with Iran, but public revelation of these dealings led both sides to repudiate the initiative.

Seeking to pressure the Gulf monarchies to cut their support for Iraq, in 1986 Iran began to attack oil tankers shipping Kuwaiti, and occasionally Saudi, oil through the Gulf. (Iraq had been striking at Iranian tankers for some time.) Kuwait asked both the US and the Soviet Union to protect its ships. The combination of Washington's interest in balancing the Soviets and desire to restore its good faith with the Arab states after the revelation of the 'Iran contra scandal' in November 1986 brought the US navy into the Gulf in early 1987, where it engaged with Iranian forces on numerous occasions. In July 1988, a US ship shot down an Iranian civilian airliner over the Gulf, mistaking it for an Iranian air force jet. Days later, Iran accepted UN Security Council Resolution 598, calling for a ceasefire in the Iran–Iraq War.

The Gulf War and the 1990s

The US naval deployment at the end of the Iran–Iraq War represented a new level of military cooperation between the Gulf monarchies and the US. Kuwait opened up its ports to US naval vessels. Saudi Arabia, which had preferred that the US military be 'over the horizon', granted US forces new levels of access to Saudi facilities. This was the beginning of what would become an open security alliance with the US in the wake of the Iraqi attack on Kuwait in August 1990.

The end of the Cold War had removed the global strategic threat that had, in part, driven US policy towards the Gulf over the previous decades. However, the first Gulf War demonstrated to Washington that local actors could challenge US oil interests and US allies in the region as well. With Saddam Hussein still in power in Iraq after the war and the Islamic Republic of Iran still at odds with the US, Washington looked to the Gulf monarchies to provide bases for the US forces that took up a long-term station in the region. The monarchies, traumatized by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and wary of Iranian intentions, welcomed the security cover that US forces provided. US military bases were established in Kuwait and Qatar. The command of the US Gulf naval force, renamed the Fifth Fleet, moved onshore in Bahrain. Oman and the UAE provided regular access to their facilities for US forces. An American air wing operated out of Saudi airbases to patrol southern Iraq. There were some negative public reactions to this new level of US military presence—most notably, the June 1996 bombing of an apartment complex in eastern Saudi Arabia called Khobar Towers, housing US air force personnel. However, these events did not alter the course of US policy.

That policy was based on the containment of both Saddam's Iraq and Islamic Iran—what the Clinton administration called 'dual containment'. Containment of Iraq was legitimated by UN Security Council resolutions that maintained severe economic and military sanctions on the country. While the sanctions were altered at times during the 1990s to try to alleviate the sufferings imposed on the Iraqi population, their cumulative effect was to impoverish the country, while not destabilizing Saddam's regime (Graham-Brown 1999). US containment of Iran was unilateral, and largely ignored by the rest of the world.

9/11 and the Iraq War

The attacks of 9/11 by Al-Qaeda on New York and Washington marked an important turning point in US policy in the Gulf. Before 9/11, the US did not particularly like either the Iraqi or the Iranian regimes, but was willing to live with them. After the attacks of that day, the Bush administration was set on changing the Gulf status quo.

The most important change was towards Iraq. The new US 'war on terrorism' was not limited to Al-Qaeda and its direct state supporter, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. President Bush defined the terrorist threat to include unfriendly states seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), because they could pass those weapons on to terrorist groups seeking to use them against the US. Iraq was named by the president as the centre of this new 'axis of evil' threatening US security. The administration succeeded in garnering US public and Congressional approval for war, but failed to receive the kind of UN mandate that had legitimated the first Gulf War. With limited international support, the US launched a war against Iraq in March 2003. In a matter of weeks, Saddam's regime had crumbled and US forces had occupied the country.

The contention that Iraq had large stockpiles of WMDs—the centrepiece of the Bush administration's public case for war—proved to be unfounded. However, the WMD issue was not the only factor in the US war decision. The belief that a US-reconstructed Iraqi polity could be a beacon of moderation and pro-Western democracy in the region, exerting pressure for reform on neighbouring states, which would then reduce the chances of terrorist groups developing in those states, was strongly held by some in the administration. The strategic benefits of increased US power in the centre of world oil production, and in an

area directly connected to Arab–Israeli issues, were also part of the decision calculus. The failure of the US to build a stable successor regime in Iraq, however, turned what the Bush administration had hoped would be a strategic asset into a liability. The US became stuck in an expensive and debilitating counter-insurgency war in Iraq that drained its resources and prestige, and increased the power of Iran in the region.

The events of 9/11 also brought to an end the tentative steps, at the end of the Clinton administration, to re-engage with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Paradoxically, the ‘war on terrorism’ pitted the US against two Iranian adversaries: the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Iran remained neutral in both wars, a stance that helped the US. There were even discussions between US and Iranian representatives on Afghan and Iraqi issues. However, Iran fell into the category of states targeted in the expansive definition of the ‘war on terrorism’, in that it was suspected of developing nuclear weapons and had links to groups identified by the US as terrorist. It was named by President Bush as one of the members of the ‘axis of evil’. The Bush administration blamed Iran for supporting insurgent groups in Iraq, and sought to build a regional front of Arab states and Israel to contain Iranian influence. It also tried to mobilize international support for sanctions aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear programme. Confrontation, not cooperation, continued to dominate the US–Iranian relationship.

Surprisingly, the 9/11 attacks had the least effect on US relations with the Gulf country most directly involved in those attacks: Saudi Arabia. The mastermind of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, and fifteen of the nineteen perpetrators were from Saudi Arabia. Many in the US saw Saudi Arabia as, at best, an ambivalent ally in the ‘war on terrorism’ and, at worst, through its funding of Islamic groups and causes around the world, a supporter of terrorism. Anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia, growing in the 1990s for reasons discussed under ‘Saudi Arabia and the Iraq War’, increased even further in reaction to what was seen by many Saudis as a US effort to blame them specifically, and Islam in general, for the attacks (Gause 2002a). It seemed that the relationship was at a crisis point. At the end of the second Gulf War, the US combat personnel who had been stationed in Saudi Arabia since 1991 were withdrawn. The Bush administration gave indications, particularly in 2004 and 2005, that it expected the Saudi leadership to undertake democratic reforms. For its part, Riyadh expressed its misgivings about US policy in Iraq. However, as the US Iraq adventure turned sour, and Iran took advantage of the regional changes to extend its power in Iraq and the broader region, Washington reverted to its traditional position of close relations with the Saudi regime. The dramatic increase in the price of oil after 2003, escalating toward US\$100 per barrel in 2007, reminded the Bush administration of the importance of Saudi Arabia to US interests.

The Gulf after the US withdrawal from Iraq

At the end of 2008, the Bush administration negotiated a status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that called for the withdrawal of all US combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. The US military departure from Iraq did not signal a general withdrawal from the Gulf: the US maintains military facilities in all of the smaller Gulf states and a substantial naval presence in the area. But the withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 symbolized an end to the US effort to establish a hegemonic position in the region. It also signalled that the local states, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, would play a much larger role

in driving the international politics of the region. The Saudi–Iranian rivalry is played out for the most part in the domestic politics of weak and divided Arab neighbours—not only Iraq, but also Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen—with both states supporting local allies. The rivalry grew in intensity as the US presence in Iraq declined, both playing on and exacerbating sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia throughout the Middle East. The domestic upheavals in the Arab world that began in Tunisia in late 2010 opened up new fronts in the rivalry, with Saudi Arabia (and the GCC) sending troops to Bahrain to support the ruling family against the demonstrations of its Shi'i majority population and supporting the revolts against Bashar al-Asad, Iran's closest Arab ally, in Syria. Tehran, while verbally supporting protests against pro-American rulers in Egypt and Bahrain, steadfastly stood by its Syrian ally.

Leaving aside the fall-out from the Arab Spring uprisings, the major international focus in the Gulf region after the US withdrawal from Iraq has been the Iranian nuclear issue. While Tehran steadfastly maintains that it is not developing a nuclear weapons capability and there is no evidence to date that it has done so, it took a number of steps that, in the eyes of many, increased the chances that it would be able to do so in the future. The Obama administration, joined by the European Union, progressively increased economic pressures on Iran, while Israel threatened military strikes unless Iran abandoned its nuclear programme. These efforts finally bore fruits and Iran, as a result of increasing external pressure and changes in its domestic politics came to the negotiating table in order to find a solution that would give relief to its economy, hit by sanctions and a steadfast drop in oil prices. As was noted at the beginning of the chapter, the Obama administration and the other major world powers initiated serious negotiations that culminated in a formal declaration on the parameters of a final agreement. The negotiations were successful and in July 2015 Iran and the P5+1 agreed on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The agreement was widely welcomed around the world as a diplomatic triumph. However, it encountered much resistance within American and, to a lesser extent, Iranian domestic political arenas. This was a symptom of the still significant distrust that permeates not only elected bodies but large swathes of the public in both countries.

The significance of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran and the Saudi–Iran war by proxy

The negotiations between the global powers and Iran have been strenuously resisted also by the two foremost American allies in the region: Saudi Arabia and Israel. This hostility towards a deal points to the fact that in addition to concerns about the Iranian nuclear programme, both Israel and Saudi Arabia are wary of an expanded Iranian role in the region following the lifting of economic sanctions. After the descent of Syria into civil war and the increased instability in Iraq, that necessitated the return of a significant number of American military personnel as 'trainers and advisors' after the withdrawal of combat troops, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a war by proxy throughout the region. The Saudi government, significantly more assertive after the ascent to the throne of King Salman, feels that it has to take matters into its own hands as it sees its interests in the regions as somewhat diverging from the ones of the United States. Whilst this distance will definitely not lead to a breakup of the Saudi–American axis it results in a much more assertive Saudi stance in areas

where it perceives its interests to be threatened by Iran. In the first few months of his rule, King Salman initiated a war in Yemen to counter the Houthi rebellion that he sees as being inspired by Iran and stepped up Saudi involvement in the Syrian civil war.

The Saudi–Iran rivalry, which has waxed and waned since the 1960s, is shaping up to be crucial not only for the international politics of the Gulf but for the balance of power in the entire region. The fact that it is presented by both parties in increasingly sectarian terms does not bode well as it strikes a chord with public opinion on both sides of the Gulf and threatens to turn the conflict into an identity based one. This tension is further exacerbated by the vagaries of the global oil market. Lower oil prices brought about by hydraulic fracturing, so called ‘fracking’, can be withstood far more easily by Saudi Arabia than by Iran, Russia, or Venezuela and add a further element of tension to the rivalry.

Conclusion

During the 1970s and the 1980s, up to the first Gulf War, the driving force behind international political events in the Gulf was the regional states themselves: the oil embargo of 1973–74; the Iranian revolution; the Iraqi war decisions of 1980 and 1990. The US played an important, but largely reactive, role in that period. It was constrained by its own domestic politics from playing a more direct military role in the Gulf and by the superpower competition of the Cold War, in which US actions could be met by Soviet reactions. The first sections of this chapter thus dealt with the motivations behind regional state behaviour—Iraqi war decisions and Saudi alliance decisions—because it was the regional states that set the agenda. That agenda was greatly influenced by the importance of transnational Arab, Muslim, and ethnic (Kurdish) identities in the region. Regime security concerns, the desire to stay in power and to thwart domestic opponents, drove regional states’ foreign policy behaviour as much as, if not more than, classic balance-of-power considerations.

The initiative in Gulf international politics passed from the regional states to the US during the Gulf War of 1990–91. The constraints of domestic public opinion and Cold War competition on US freedom of action were removed, and the Gulf monarchies were willing to associate themselves with the US military in an unprecedented way. The attacks of 9/11 marked a further escalation of US regional involvement, as the ‘war on terrorism’ became both the motive and the justification for the US to shed the last international constraint on its behaviour in the Gulf: the need for international legitimation provided by the United Nations. The invasion of Iraq was the first step in an ambitious effort to change not only the regional balance of power, but also the domestic politics of the Gulf states. Those hegemonic ambitions foundered on the realities of Iraqi domestic politics, with the Bush administration unable to consolidate a pro-American, democratic Iraqi regime that would be both a model of, and a base for pressing for, political change in Iran and Saudi Arabia. It had been a domestic political event—the Iranian revolution—that had scuttled an earlier US security policy in the Gulf. The complexities of Iraqi domestic politics seem to have put paid to Washington’s more recent dreams of recreating the Persian Gulf in its own image. Now, after the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq, local powers are once again take centre stage as the drivers of Gulf international politics. In particular, Saudi Arabia and Iran have become

involved in a war by proxy throughout the entire region: not exclusively in the Gulf. This rivalry is unlikely to escalate into an armed conflict but it is nevertheless fierce. The fact that it is increasingly portrayed as identity based adds to the difficulty and contributes to the challenge of finding an accommodation that would lower the tension in the Gulf and throughout the region.

Key events

- 1968 Britain announces withdrawal from its remaining Gulf protectorates in 1971
Military coup in Iraq brings Baath Party to power
- 1971 Independence of Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates
- 1973 Arab oil embargo against the US during 1973 Arab–Israeli War
Quadrupling of oil prices by early 1974
- 1975 Algiers accord between Iran and Iraq
- 1977 Beginning of unrest in Iran
- 1979 Fall of Shah's regime
Establishment of Islamic Republic of Iran
Second oil crisis, with oil prices doubling
Saddam Hussein becomes president of Iraq
Takeover of US embassy in Tehran
Soviet Union invades Afghanistan
- 1980 Failed US military raid in Iran aimed at freeing embassy hostages
Beginning of Iran–Iraq War
- 1981 Negotiated end of Iranian–US hostage crisis
- 1982 Iraqi troops retreat from Iranian territory
Iranian troops carry war into Iraqi territory
- 1986 Oil prices collapse, briefly falling below US\$10 per barrel
- 1987 US naval deployment in Persian Gulf to protect Kuwaiti and Saudi shipping 1988
US navy shoots down civilian Iranian airliner over Persian Gulf
- 1988 Iran accepts ceasefire in Iran–Iraq War
- 1990 Iraq invades Kuwait
- 1991 US-led international coalition defeats Iraq and restores Kuwaiti government
Large-scale uprisings in southern and north-eastern Iraq
Baghdad restores control over the south
Kurdish areas in north-east gain de facto independence from Baghdad under US protection

- 1996 Iraq accepts 'Oil for Food' Programme under UN auspices
Explosion at US air force housing facility in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, kills nineteen, and wounds hundreds
Osama bin Laden declares war on US
- 1998 Three days of US air and missile strikes on Iraq in 'Operation Desert Fox'
- 2001 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington
- 2003 US invasion of Iraq
- 2004 Simultaneous uprisings in Sunni Arab and Shia Arab areas of Iraq against US forces
- 2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad elected president of Iran
- 2006 Phase of intense sectarian violence in Iraq
UN Security Council calls on Iran to end uranium enrichment
- 2008 US 'surge' strategy of additional troops to Iraq
Surge in world oil prices to US\$140 per barrel, then collapse to below US\$50 per barrel in world financial crisis
- 2009 World oil prices recover in 2009
- 2011 Withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq
- 2012 World oil prices over US\$100 per barrel
- 2013 Hassan Rouhani elected Iranian president
- 2013 Preliminary agreement between P5+1 and Iran
- 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear programme

Further reading

- Al-Rasheed, M. (2002) *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
A reinterpretation of the country's history that emphasizes power and domination.
- Bill, J. (1988) *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)
The essential background to understanding the fraught US-Iranian relationship.
- Gause, F. G., III (2010) *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
A comprehensive account of the events discussed in this chapter.
- Keddie, N. R. (2003) *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)
The best single-volume history of modern Iran.
- Marr, P. (2011) *The Modern History of Iraq* (3rd edn, Boulder, CO: Westview Press)
A comprehensive and readable one-volume history.
- Packer, G. (2005) *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
One reporter's account of the political manoeuvrings leading up to the Iraq War and its consequences in both Iraq and the US.

- Ricks, T. E. (2006) *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin)
A searing journalistic exposé of US political and military blunders in Iraq.
- Takeyh, R. (2009) *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press)
The best recent account of Iranian foreign policy.
- Vitalis, R. (2007) *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)
An outstanding revisionist history of the development of the Saudi–US relationship, the Saudi oil industry, and Saudi politics from the 1940s through the 1960s.

Questions

1. What changed in the international politics of the Gulf after the British withdrew from East of Suez in the 1970s?
2. Is the concept of a balance of power adequate in understanding the international politics of the region?
3. What are the main drivers of American policy in the Gulf and how have they evolved in the last four decades?
4. What is the nature of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry?
5. How have Iran–US relations evolved since the 1970s? Are these two countries destined to be adversaries?

Note

1. See <http://www.pbs.org>