
Policy Brief #7

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U.S. Challenges and Choices in the Gulf: Israel and the Gulf

This policy brief is based on the discussion at the ninth in a jointly sponsored series of congressional staff briefings on “U.S. Challenges and Choices in the Gulf.” To receive information on future briefings, contact Jennifer Davies at jdavies@stanleyfoundation.org.

While the debate on U.S. policy in the Gulf continues to be examined and evaluated, Israel’s role in Gulf security remains largely in the background. Yet the roles that these states play in each others’ security, and moreover, the *perceptions* of these roles, may become increasingly important.

Israel, particularly in the light of the most recent *intifada*, views its position in the Middle East as increasingly insecure. Seeing its very existence as a state threatened by domestic terrorists and foreign hostilities, Israel relies on a strong military and preemptive policy in response to perceived short-, medium- and long-term threats.

The Arab Gulf states view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a major destabilizing force in the region from a political and ideological standpoint. Yet their security concerns are more local. They view the Iranian arms buildup with caution, and they view U.S. intervention and threats of military action with concern.

Increasingly viewed as an occupying force, the United States must walk a fine line; balancing its goal of bringing greater security/stability to the Gulf and assuaging fears of U.S. domination of the region, while at the same time supporting Israel’s security.

I. Gulf Views of Israel, the United States, and Each Other

Israel

Since the beginning of the new *intifada*, Gulf states have lost confidence that Israel is committed to peace in the Middle East. Having lost its dividends accumulated through the Peace Process because of its perceived aggressive behavior against Palestinian civilians, which has been emphasized by graphic television footage, Israel has come to be seen as an enemy that has rejected all peace offers and aspires to control the Gulf region and its wealth. The Gulf states’ loss of patience with Israel’s efforts to resolve the crisis is contrasted with their own perceived commitment to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as reflected by their continued support of Crown Prince Abdullah’s peace plan.

The role of the United States in this process, particularly its support of the current Israeli government, has led to outrage among the Gulf states. They view the most recent U.S. approach, including a call for a change of leadership in the PLO before proceeding with Israeli concessions, as a policy of disengagement. Perceived failure by the United States to resolve the conflict peacefully and equitably currently undermines Arab Gulf regimes’ legitimacy and strengthens Islamist forces.

At the popular level, the “Arab street” increasingly views the Arab-Israeli conflict in terms of a religious war. The growing momentum of this popular sentiment is apparent in the recent boycotting of American goods, including cultural goods such as U.S. media and movies, which have generally been extremely popular. While leftist/secular anti-Israel groups have been all but eclipsed since the demise of the Soviet Union, organizations like Hizbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ are becoming increasingly popular. As a result, the Arab-Israeli conflict now appears to many Gulf citizens as a war between Muslim and Jew, i.e., it has been transformed from a primarily political conflict into one that is primarily religious in nature.

These views are compounded by the U.S. war on terrorism, which is being increasingly interpreted by Arab citizens as a Judeo-Christian war against Islam. In particular, there is a growing perception among all socio-economic strata in the Arab world that Sharon’s policies in the West Bank and U.S. policies towards Iraq are linked, and that together they are part of a long-range, coherent campaign against the Islamic world.

However, Gulf states do view the United States’ pact with Israel as a positive factor, insofar as it limits Israel’s unilateral offensive military action. The weapons acquisition programs of Gulf states have little, if anything, to do with Israel. Gulf states procure conventional military equipment with an eye to their eastern flank (Iran), not to their western flank (Israel). For example, recent meetings with Gulf air force officials regarding the future of theater missile defense deployments revealed that Arab states would deploy the radars and interceptors to face India and Iran, not Israel. As a result, the weapons acquisitions programs of the Gulf states have little to do with Israel’s military capabilities. In contrast to Iran and Iraq, the Arab Gulf states do not perceive Israel as a significant *strategic* threat to the region.

Iraq

Unlike the United States, the Arab Gulf governments do not view Iraq as an immediate threat. They oppose the U.S. administration’s call for regime change for two major reasons. First, they feel an Iraqi nuclear arsenal – and by extension, other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – is acceptable as long as Israel has nuclear weapons.

The second reason concerns the use of unilateral force. Although Gulf governments do not like Saddam, they do not perceive Iraq to be an imminent threat to their security. They would not oppose regime change in Baghdad, but do believe that it should take place within the context of international law and not through unilateral American action. Given popular anti-American sentiment, Gulf leaders fear that a unilateral U.S. attack against Iraq would undermine their regimes and those of other pro-Western Arab states.

There is a strong and growing sense throughout the Gulf states that the United States is addressing the Middle East as if approaching a list of countries that it intends to dominate. Iraq, in their view, may well be just the first of many countries in the region to face ‘regime change’ and occupation by U.S. forces.

Nevertheless, Gulf regimes depend on U.S. backing for their survival and would, in the event of war, ally themselves with the United States – with the proviso that they keep that alliance secret. Governments are not willing to be seen as supporting another outside military intervention, even if they agree with the necessity for Saddam Hussein’s removal from power. Gulf countries would, however, be more willing to cooperate if the United States demonstrated its commitment to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict in a peaceful and equitable manner.

Iran

In contrast to Iraq, Arab Gulf countries do view Iran as a more pressing security threat. Within the Gulf region, many believe that a U.S.-led attack on Iraq would prompt a nationalistic reaction by its neighbor in the form of increased military spending and weapons development. Iran already views regime change in Iraq as a pretext to attack Iran.

Moreover, talk of U.S. military incursions into Iraq could also trigger increased Iranian support for violent Muslim groups determined to deepen the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Iran may view this low-intensity strategy as the best way to distract the United States and undermine any potential designs to attack Tehran.

II. Israeli Views of Major Regional Actors

The Israeli government views some Gulf states (Iran, Iraq) as direct and pressing threats to its very existence, while it views others (Arab Monarchies) as latent threats due to unstable and weak governments. These threats can generally be grouped in terms of immediate, medium-term, and long-term threats.

Immediate Threat: Iran

Contrary to the present view of the United States, Israel sees Iran as the most immediate and severe danger to its security. Iran publicly supports Hizbollah, providing them with operational and financial assistance. Although Iran does not have the capability to deliver WMD except by terrorist groups, they are not far from developing a missile system that could hit Israel.

Medium-Term Threat: Iraq

Iraq is seen as a mid-term problem, mainly due to Iraq's possession of WMD. Unlike Iran, Iraq does not have a long tradition of direct opposition to Israel, nor of supporting terrorist groups in opposition to Israel. Only recently has Iraq begun the use of terrorism, and then mostly against the Iraqi Kurds. An Iraqi nuclear arsenal would not necessarily lead to their use, outside of a 'nothing to lose' scenario, but would create a deterrent from behind which Iraq could sponsor more terrorist attacks abroad.

The Israeli understanding of Iraq's WMD program, and the missiles used in delivery, is similar to the understanding of the United States: that, at the time of the Gulf War, the Iraqi nuclear program was still in development and the missiles available were inaccurate. Yet, despite this, Saddam Hussein fired a number of missiles at Israel during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Israelis believe that Saddam Hussein sees himself as a person who will one day destroy Israel and, with this view in mind, he will almost certainly attack Israel if he believes that his regime and/or life is about to end.

In light of this threat, Israel does support a U.S. attack against Iraq, even if it prefers a U.S. focus on Iran. Israel hopes that the United States will destroy Iraqi Scud missiles and occupy western Iraq (where most Scuds are located) with a large number of troops. In the event that Iraq launches Scud missiles against Israel, as it did during the Gulf War, it would be difficult for the United States to stop Israel from retaliating. On the other hand, Israel may not react immediately if its own response would be relatively ineffective and if it would interfere with U.S. military action. It remains to be seen whether public Israeli statements about military retaliation constitute a firm policy position, or posturing.

Long-Term Problem: General Regional Security

One of Israel's greatest fears is the spread of an ultra-conservative Islamic revolution. Despite the recent violence, Israel understands that the greatest hope for peace lies in its neighbors maintaining a moderate ideology. The spread of the view of a religious war, or even the simple spread of instability to weakened

governments, would greatly threaten Israel's own security. To defend against this, Israel advocates gradual democratic and economic transition throughout the region.

III. Key Facets of U.S. Policy in the Gulf

Reducing Anti-American Sentiment

The first challenge of the United States in the Gulf region is to change its image as part of a Judeo-Christian alliance acting in opposition to Islamic countries. The United States must emphasize tolerance and justice in the eyes of the Gulf states through an active role in the Middle East Peace Process. Such a change would greatly aid in bringing peace and stability to the region.

Advancing Multilateral Action

Moreover, the United States must reduce the image of being one more in a long history of outside powers imposing its will on the region by military force. A renewed emphasis must be placed on multilateral action during any military action in the region. Where Israeli, Gulf and U.S. perspectives do coincide is in their shared dislike of Saddam Hussein's regime. Whether Iraq is viewed as the immediate threat (United States), a medium-term threat (Israel) or merely a security concern (Gulf states), everyone agrees that Saddam Hussein is bad for the region. However, not everyone has concluded that the area would be better off without him, especially if the alternative is perceived as a foothold for expanding U.S. economic and strategic interests in the region, or if regime change would bring about a more radical Islamist regime. In seeking support in the region, the United States must recognize that any action it takes will be linked, in the eyes of Gulf states, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.