

# Gulf Conflict's Spillover Threat

By Ghassan Salame

**W**ASHINGTON — With the Gulf war cannons now clearly heard in Kuwait, the leaders of the six conservative governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are more worried than ever by the prospect of the Iranian-Iraqi hostilities spilling over into their own countries, especially since Iranian warnings against them have turned harsh. They are aware of the important implications for their security of the outcome of the war, whatever that may be.

For the council, which groups Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar, an Iranian victory would have far-reaching negative consequences. Iranian nationalism has traditionally wanted the Gulf to be Farsi (Persian), in name and in reality.

This led the Iranians to cross Gulf waters many times in history, most recently in 1975 to help the sultan of Oman defeat a Marxist rebellion and to occupy three islets also claimed by the United Arab Emirates.

Since the establishment of the revolutionary regime in Tehran, pro-Iranian groups have been active in Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates as well as in Mecca during the yearly pilgrimage.

If the Iranians were to win the war, the outcome for the GCC countries could imply, at the least, an assertive Iranian military role in the Gulf, heavy Iranian pressure on those emirates where an important fraction of the

population is Shiite (Bahrain and Kuwait) and some pressure on all six council countries, which would probably be reflected in their oil policies and their diplomacy.

An Iraqi victory, which seems less likely, would have less negative effects. A victorious Iraq would probably press the council countries for more financial help to rebuild its economy, stronger support in its centuries-old conflict with Iran, oil policies adapted to Iraqi needs for a larger share of the oil market and some alignment of the council countries with Iraqi positions in inter-Arab feuds.

However, while an Iranian victory would be felt all over the Gulf, the consequences of an Iraqi victory would be felt much more in Kuwait than elsewhere in the region.

Iraqi governments have consistently asked for a wider window on the Gulf through the leasing of the Kuwaiti islands of Warba and Bubiyan. Some Iraqis even consider Kuwait as a part of Iraqi territory. This led, in 1961, to an unsuccessful Iraqi attempt to annex the emirate. Finally, Iraq could possibly press the council countries to accept Baghdad as a full member in their enviable millionaires' club.

This would completely change the function of this regional grouping. To a large extent, the Gulf Cooperation Council was established to isolate the six monarchies of the Arabian peninsula from the negative effects of the war. Many ideas for such a grouping were expressed, but the structure could not be created until the Gulf war started in 1980.

The objective was to unify, or at least to coordinate, the military-security capabilities of the six countries. The grouping has its headquarters in Riyadh, an indication of the

pivotal role played by Saudi Arabia and of the Saudis' strengthened influence over their small and vulnerable neighbors.

This presents a sensitive dilemma: More integration of the security and military capabilities among the six council countries means a clearer Saudi leadership and an unequal satellite role for the smaller five.

As a Western military expert noted, "Greater cooperation smacks of legitimizing Saudi interference in the internal affairs of its neighbors."

In the five small emirates, not everybody wishes for such an outcome. Some still resent the Saudi territorial expansionism over the last two centuries; while others, especially in Kuwait, point to the difference between their constitutional governments and the authoritarian traditional monarchy in Saudi Arabia.

The rulers of Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates fear that a more assertive Saudi role in their countries would trigger a more aggressive policy by Iran or Iraq toward them.

**T**hese considerations explain why Kuwait has, until now, refrained from signing the internal security agreement already ratified by the other five members. It also explains why the council's rapid deployment force, formed after the unsuccessful coup in Bahrain, is still very modest. This regional deployment force, named the Arabian Shield Forces, is basically formed of a Saudi brigade with some token forces from the other five countries, with a total of almost 10,000 men.

The six countries still have a long way to go before being able to meet a substantial military threat. That is due to the very limited size of their populations and to an evident technological backwardness. Most of the arsenals are very recent, and Bedouin warfare tradition, still a strong factor in Saudi Arabia, is poorly adapted to modern hostilities.

A Rand Corporation report has estimated that compared with the Jordanians or Pakistanis, "it may require twice as long to produce a Saudi pilot, mechanic or supply clerk with U.S. proficiency standards." Better-paid jobs in the civilian sector do not encourage enrollment in the armed forces and the governments have been extremely reluctant to impose a draft.

A real improvement in the military capabilities of the Gulf Cooperation Council is, however, noticeable. But using military force on a large scale is still to be avoided. That is why after shooting down an Iranian aircraft in 1984, the Saudis have refrained from directly engaging the Iranians again, despite the continuing attacks on oil tankers by Iran.

The Iranians have, in general, been careful not to provoke the council countries directly since they do not want to confront new military forces.

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