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Perceived Threats and Perceived Loyalties

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When Amin al-Rihani, the Lebanese-born American traveller, arrived in Riyadh, the tiny capital of an emerging kingdom which was not yet named Saudi Arabia, he was bringing with him an ambitious project for Arab unity. In a mixture of the flamboyant romanticism of the Lebanese mountains and admiration for the United States of America, he wanted to know what his host thought of a unified Arab state (probably restricted to Asia). The king's reaction was irritated but clear: 'What Arab unity? We are the Arabs.'

The question was not settled with this sharp answer. The walls of Beirut constantly reminded me of our (non-Gulf Arabs') 'hidden link' to the Gulf. For a long while, I tried to guess the meaning of a slogan written on many Beiruti walls: 'The Arabs' oil is theirs' or, in a strongly repetitive sentence, *Naft al-Arab li al-Arab*. Why shouldn't it be? I asked myself, without clearly understanding what the *naft* was, and who the Arabs really were. Many years later, pro-Iraqi militants were blackening many of our neighbourhood walls with an equally peremptory statement: 'Today Shatt al-Arab and tomorrow Jerusalem.' In the autumn of 1980, there were people who thought that the Iraqi army might turn westward after an easy victory over Iran. But 'today' was to mean many, too many years, for the 'tomorrow' not to disappear under several layers of paint and new, graphically and semantically different graffiti.

For those who were interested in maps, the 'arabity' of the Gulf was obviously a debatable matter. Why, otherwise, call all these maritime areas 'Arab' from Shatt al-Arab to Bahr al-Arab — the Arabian Sea — which unexpectedly stretched to Bombay on our school map, via a long finger of water called the Arab

Gulf in the maps printed in the Kuwaiti monthly *al-Arab*, and Persian in most if not all of our important school books. In these books, the 'Arab' was often identified with the 'Arabian', triggering in our minds a feeling of only partial identification, but supporting Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud's view of himself as the true Arab.

Mixed signals of belonging, of relationship and of interests were indeed conveyed to us teenagers in those tormented days. Speaking of loyalties and of perceptions indeed means interrogating political culture. Loyalty to what? Loyalty to whom? What kinds of map, slogan and other texts were offered to our eyes and how did we actually read them? One has always to bear in mind that these texts were provided by many different, conflicting sources. One of them is the foreign power whose culture has dominated the country before she achieved 'cultural independence'. And it was clear that in Lebanon or in Tunisia, the interest for the Gulf was severely limited by the restricted French presence (before 1973 at least) in areas so clearly dominated by the Anglo-Saxons. Until the mid-1970s, France did not have an ambassador in the smaller Gulf states and had marginal relations with Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Those educated in French books (together with Arabic ones) had to participate in some of this 'benign neglect'.

Did the books, papers, etc. in Arabic provide us with the necessary complement? Not enough. Viewed from Beirut, through its Arab-subsidised papers and the discourse of Arab-supported politicians, the Arab world was clearly divided into two categories: the moderate and the excited for some; the reactionary and the revolutionary for others. But despite Nuri al-Saᶜid's era or King Faisal's duel with Nasser in the Yemen, Gulf politics was in a way marginal to the confrontation between Nasserite Egypt and the West (helped by its 'clients') or, in other circles, between the leftist dictators and their enemies. Jordan and Chamoun's Lebanon naturally came first while Iraq was hardly perceived as a Gulf country, probably until the day when General Qasim, turning his back on 'Greater Syrian' politics, laid his claim to Kuwait. But even then, a rebellion in historic Mosul seemed much more important than the future of a tiny emirate, somewhere to the south of historic Basra.

LOYALTIES IN ARAB PUBLIC OPINION

Arabs might be more informed today but hardly more knowledgeable of their own public opinion. Polls are not something much cherished by authoritarian regimes and the few we have are restricted to a very limited group of Arab countries and on a very limited number of topics. Hence, to speak on or for Arab public opinion is a very risky exercise, where the illustration you use is easily refuted as unrepresentative, and the experience you are familiar with rejected as too peculiar. Speculation and conjecture are inevitable if some thought is to be devoted to this topic. And one has to rely avowedly more on one's impressions, readings and discussions, and on the fact of having come from or been there, rather than on the results of this or that poll, including the one conducted by Sa^c^ad Eddin Ibrahim on Arab unity in the mid-1970s which has been overquoted and overused by writers, despite his very cautious presentation of the poll's findings.[1]

What this study, the largest of its kind, has shown, is that Arabs want a higher degree of cooperation among their states. They do not think that differences between political regimes are a formidable obstacle to cooperation and unity, and their attachment to their national state is real. Interestingly, those who were for many decades at the centre of Arab politics are less enthusiastic about Arab unity than those who were at the margins: students and peasants are more interested in it than the intellectual-academic elites; Tunisians and Kuwaitis are more hopeful for it than Egyptians and Palestinians. But out of a sample of 6,000 respondents in ten Arab countries, emerges the clear idea (78.5 per cent of the respondents) that a somewhat vague 'Arab entity' does exist. Much the same proportion, 77.9 per cent, consider the Arabs to constitute 'one nation' and 53 per cent think borders separating Arab states are 'artificial'. However, 41.9 per cent see real advantages in the removal of these borders. Realism is not absent: only 36.4 per cent of the respondents desire Arab unity to be achieved in the short term. A clear majority (57.3 per cent) prefers some form of federation to unification *à la prusse*, but 78.5 per cent want a higher level of inter-Arab cooperation than the present one.

The two surveys conducted by Diab and Melikian indicate that between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s Arab culture became more receptive to the nation-state as an important

ingredient of one's identity.[2] This finding is itself vulnerable since Paul Starr found that, due to the 1973 war with Israel, the same milieu (students at the American University of Beirut) gave a renewed value to their Arab identity as compared with citizenship of a certain state, with an equal identification with the Arab cause among students coming from 'the confrontation states' and those coming from other Arab countries, including the Gulf.[3]

Much more interesting data are provided by surveys conducted in the late 1970s, notably in the Gulf. Tawfiq Farah's study on group affiliations among undergraduate students of Kuwait University shows that religious bonds are central, family comes second, and citizenship a poor third. Not so many students would first think of themselves as Arabs.[4] This finding is corroborated by Faisal al-Salem's study, which showed that among Gulf students only 7 per cent would refer to themselves as Arab and 36 per cent would accept as a fact the existence of an Arab world extending from the Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean. Only 3 per cent answered the following question, 'Why does the Arab world form one nation?'[5]

These enquiries certainly give us indications of how the public views loyalties. But the contradictions in the findings are clear and limitations obvious: students are over-represented in the samples, as are countries with a relatively open political regime (Lebanon, Kuwait). Most of the surveys were conducted in the 1970s, when pan-Arab feelings were low and Arab politics very frustrating. But they also underline a few indicators which need to be tested. One of them is that exposure to Arab politics tends to diminish hopes in inter-Arab solidarity. Another is what S.E. Ibrahim has called 'political realism', where solidarity is accepted and cooperation is sought but pan-Arab nationalist beliefs are on the wane. With the likely exception of religion, it is difficult to find, with such limited results, where the hard core of political loyalties is.

CONTEMPORARY IMAGES OF LOYALTIES

Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils have, in a slightly different way, established a difference between 'primordial' and 'secondary' loyalties, i.e. between loyalties that you can hardly escape from, that are 'given' to you upon your birth, and loyalties that

are 'taken' by you later and with which you can reportedly dispense.[6] Parallel to this distinction is another one, drawn by sociologists between a 'mechanical' solidarity with your family, your tribe, your clan, etc. and an 'ideological' solidarity which you engage in with a group of friends, a club or a political party. Seductive as it is, this distinction could hardly be considered a clear, definitive *summa divisio.* On a general level, it is very difficult to draw the line between what is given to you and what you take. It has been convincingly demonstrated that loyalties which are felt as primordial, authentic and inalienable have actually been fashioned by a hegemonic external power.[7] On a regional level, it is indeed very difficult to determine what is given and what is taken in a political culture such as the contemporary Arab one, which is precisely full of 'ideological' identities masquerading as 'authentic primordial' ones.

One should go beyond the prevailing (and sterile) polemics on Arabs failing to show solidarity with other Arabs; on the Libyan frustration with the lack of anti-American feelings in the Arab world after the US attack on Tripoli in 1986, on Iraqi frustrations with the Arab lack of concern — when it is not blatant complicity with the enemy — in the Iraq–Iran war, or with often publicised Lebanese dissatisfaction with their fellow Arabs; not to mention the Palestinian habit of blaming other Arabs for their failure to have a country of their own. These frustrations are now general. One could think it is a transient phase of disaffection and disunity or, on the contrary, think that this is the 'natural' state of affairs, a state which was temporarily altered by the Nasserite-Baᶜthi era in Arab politics. The basic issue of loyalty is now probably viewed in four different manners, if one has to leave aside, at least for the moment, the question of sub-state (local, tribal, ethnic) identities.

The first is to think that the nation-state, the one built today in 22 different ways across the Arab world, is the locus of politically relevant political loyalty. Some of these states have undoubtedly been here for centuries or millennia (such as Egypt), others were created in a much more artificial way in the twentieth century (Jordan could be an example). But the contemporary international system does not accommodate *terra nullius,* and hence looks to individuals to belong to states. States are indeed the privileged international actors and Arabs are supposed to identify with them, according to their place of residence, whatever the historical credentials of these states.

Hence there are no Arabs in a political meaning but rather Lebanese or Saudis, Moroccans or Libyans. Arabism is actually reduced to language and contiguity, two 'weak' cleavages in the modern world: French or Spanish languages do not really create effective world powers, and contiguity has been a less than effective bond in areas such as the Indian subcontinent or sub-Saharan Africa. In this perspective, an Egyptian or a Syrian should not particularly care about the Iraq–Iran war or the inter-Yemeni conflict more than he does for, say, the Turkish–Greek conflict, at least as far as his state is not involved in or threatened by these conflicts.

The second view is the classic Arab nationalist one which could be summarised as follows: the Arabs together form a nation (like the Germans, the French or the Italians). Foreign powers (and separatist forces) have partitioned the nation into 22 separate units. But nineteenth-century German or Italian nations were united into one state and this will ultimately happen to the Arabs. Hence the nation's interests are 'higher' and more 'abiding' than those of the smaller state units and should always overshadow them. Classic Arab nationalists would therefore tend to change this book's topic into 'the Gulf *in* the Arab World', or 'The Gulf *and the rest of* the Arab World'. Consequently, it is assumed that Israel, Iran, Ethiopia and Turkey, as well as foreign world powers, consistently threaten Arab interests. Arab states should forget their divisions to repel the foreign enemies and, for example, help Iraq defend 'the Arabism of the Gulf'. On the other hand, gigantic oil resources which happen to be located in this area are ultimately the property of all Arabs. These oil states have the duty to share their revenues with other Arab countries and to give precedence in employment to a fellow Arab over a non-Arab rival.

A third view would posit that the state is a 'foreign artificial creation' but that Arab nationalism is certainly not the alternative. Rather than supra-state loyalties, this trend invests in trans-state ones. This includes, of course, the wave of Muslim fundamentalism which has grown since the mid-1970s seriously affecting many Arab countries in the Gulf and elsewhere. Even before the triumph of Khomeini, 39.3 per cent of the respondents to S.E. Ibrahim's poll answered that 'Islam' is a major factor in the definition of Arabism. It also includes the *shi^{c}i/sunni* cleavage, which is becoming a sensitive one in view of the Iraq–Iran war, of the urban sunni protests against the *Alawi-*

dominated regime in Syria and of the repeated, and increasingly damaging, Palestinian–Syrian and Palestinian–Amal fighting in Lebanon. This cleavage, which runs from the Beiruti neighbourhood of 'al-Labban into Afghanistan', according to some, is particularly sensitive in the Fertile Crescent area, and to a lesser extent on the Gulf coast of the Arabian peninsula, but is hardly known to the west of the Suez Canal. One could add that in view of the fundamentalist wave, and of the shiᶜi/sunni cleavage, trans-state Christian Arab coordination or even 'movement' could be considered as a necessary option by some of the 10 million (or so) Christian Arabs. This cleavage, however, is an issue in the Fertile Crescent and the Nile Valley areas but hardly present in the Arabian peninsula or the Maghreb.

The fourth view is more modernistic in its outlook. It rejects trans- and supra-state loyalties and replaces them with a 'received' realistic view that in the modern world small underdeveloped, politically and socially comparable states should join together in a search for cooperation and added advantages. This logic presides over the creation of regional state organisations. But it did not really work in the Arab League framework for different reasons, including the maximalist/minimalist polemics between Arab nationalism and the nation-states; ideological differences and contradictory alignments in the international system; and the organic weakness of the organisation itself. Hence the idea of creating smaller, sub-regional organisations, with more homogeneity in political and social matters and geographic closeness. One example of this trend is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), differently viewed in the Arab world; sometimes as a first step towards Arab unity, and more often as a *club des riches* which would isolate the Gulf from the rest of the Arab world and, more specifically, deprive the Arabs of the Gulf's enviable resources.

These four views naturally lead to four different images of what the relationship between the Gulf and the Arab world is or should be, and to different answers to nagging questions in contemporary Arab politics, such as: Is Iraq first and foremost Iraq, or an 'atheist Aflaqi regime' or the 'eastern flank of the Arab world'? What is the meaning of the slogan 'Arab oil belongs to the Arabs'? It cannot mean any more that oil is not the property of western oil companies since legal nationalisations have taken place. Does it mean now that Gulf oil belongs to all the Arabs? The resilience of Arab states is real but it

should not veil the fact that almost everywhere in the Arab world opposition to the regimes is inspired, supported or even triggered by other neighbouring countries. Behind the (more or less) strong façade of autonomous and stable Arab states, the opposition (and potential alternative) to the regimes is, more often than not, part of regional frustrations and of regional dreams. The Gulf states, because they are so much wealthier than the others, can even less forget that reality.

GULF RESOURCES

Here, today, is the crux of the matter: The Gulf is rich and the rest of the Arab world much, much poorer. Oil (and natural gas) makes the difference. The Gulf area (GCC + Iraq + Iran) was producing 35 per cent of the world supply of crude oil, liquefied natural gas, other liquids and refinery gain in 1973, 32 per cent in 1979 and 17 per cent in 1985. This decline should not blur the view of the future, when the Gulf countries, and notably Saudi Arabia, will certainly play a pivotal role. Many experts think that the decline in oil prices that plagued the 1980s is bound to be followed by a new surge at the end of the decade or in the early 1990s. Anyway, the difference between the Gulf and the rest of the Arab world is bound to remain substantial in the foreseeable future, even if the gap could be somehow narrowed. Selected 1982 data well illustrate this gap: the *per capita* GNP was around $15,500 in Saudi Arabia, $19,600 in Kuwait, $25,300 in the United Arab Emirates and around $1,700 in Jordan and Syria, $800 in Morocco, and $770 in Egypt.

It is only natural for a state, or a group of states, to seek some influence over neighbouring, well-endowed and poorly defended ones, especially when cultural and other themes could be manipulated to this effect. It is as 'natural' to see the latter trying to limit, as far as possible, this pressure. A 'natural' result of the whole process is a certain amount of frustration and misgivings. How non-Gulf Arabs view Gulf oil is indeed a very sensitive issue in contemporary Arab politics. One Gulf leader has summarised the area's frustrations when he said that 'whatever the non-Gulf Arabs are given will never be enough for them.'[8] The other extreme is illustrated by the many cartoons published in the Cairo press in 1976–77 when President Sadat

was showing his nervousness towards what he considered as 'Gulf princes' avarice', or in the words of that Egyptian intellectual blaming the Gulf Arabs for the housing crisis in Cairo in these terms: 'They do not give us money to build our houses but they rent the best apartments in the city and spend a maximum of two weeks a year in them.'[9]

The idea that Abqaiq field belongs to the 'Arab nation' is nothing but an ideological statement. To deny aid to Syria or the PLO, as Washington has often invited the Gulf countries to do, would be politically almost as unrealistic. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait can neither share their wealth with other Arabs nor deny them a part of it. How much to give, to whom, with what kinds of conditions, are the real questions. Through aid to governments and remittances of Arab expatriates in the Gulf, the 'oil boom' bounties have largely spread across borders to Jordan, Syria, Egypt or Tunisia. This spread did not radically change the basic feature: the Arab world is divided into rich and poor states and it happens that the rich countries are in general underpopulated and poorly defended.

One very important ingredient of the Arab view of the Gulf is to be found in how those who return from the Gulf view it. What kind of image does the Egyptian teacher, the Sudanese nurse or the Lebanese engineer now have (and will probably be spreading) of the countries where they have been working for ten or fifteen years? Studies conducted among Turks returning from Germany have shown that the image carried back home is globally positive, the image of a developed and wealthy country that allowed Turks, unemployed in their own country, to make a living and then to go back home with some savings and an improved social status. Similar studies have led to generally positive feelings among Maghrebi workers going back home after years of work in European factories. Studies on Arab expatriates coming back from the Gulf are now being launched in different countries, most notably Egypt and Yemen. What the picture will be like is not yet clear. One could, however, point to the fact that these expatriates generally belong to the same culture and share the same religion and the same language. They have moved from an underdeveloped economy to one which was as underdeveloped or more, but much luckier in having oil. It is consequently predictable that the picture conveyed back home is much more complex and more ambiguous than the one of a Turk coming back home from a

culturally different, economically advanced and organically alien country such as Germany or Sweden. One cannot dismiss out of hand repeated tales of 'arrogance', 'greed', 'exploitation', 'discrimination', encountered by Arab expatriates to the Gulf. These feelings are exacerbated when compared with the deference shown by Gulf leaders to anyone and anything western. Frustration is naturally linked to expectation and the non-Gulf Arabs naturally expect to be better treated and somehow more naturally welcomed in the Gulf than Indians or Koreans. The fact that they can be treated just like other non-Arab or non-Muslim expatriates seems to hurt their feelings deeply.

However, Arabs in the Gulf are not equally treated and the picture they convey, despite these general features, probably varies, depending on the personal experience (and success) of the expatriate, on his expectations and his motivations before going there, as well as on his 'national' identity. A successful Lebanese Christian entrepreneur does not come back from Saudi Arabia with the feelings of an Egyptian Muslim construction worker. There are indeed numerous variables. The 'national' one is important as far as it might influence the policies followed by the governments of the expatriates' countries. The harsh sentences on 20 Egyptian workers who engaged in 'economic sabotage' in Iraq were not and could not have been ignored by the Cairo government. Discrimination against shiᶜa or Palestinians could always lead to inter-state conflicts, and it is possible that returning expatriates, beside their indirect input on the picture, could form loose organisations of 'veterans', especially when they come back from the Gulf into unemployment in their own countries.

That this input would affect perceptions and loyalties is natural. But this process also depends on the kind of perceptions and loyalties already established. A Palestinian who comes back to Jordan or the West Bank could add to the Palestinians' frustration with the lack of Arab interest in their cause. A Lebanese Christian or a Lebanese shiᶜi could strengthen sectarian feelings in his country through tales of more or less overt discrimination he had to face in the Gulf. Egyptian isolationism could be reinforced by those expatriates who were considered in the Gulf countries as mere foreigners, though they probably have more positive feelings than those who were suddenly expelled from Libya in Summer 1985, or those who had to face the very restrictive 1986 Iraqi laws on transfer of savings. To a

large extent, those who can make it to Kuwait or to Saudi Arabia are (and are considered) privileged when compared to those who work in non-GCC oil countries.

It is equally true, as Arab nationalists point out, that millions of Arabs have also been given the opportunity to meet each other, to communicate, to work together and ultimately to know each other, and that that could also build networks of solidarity and cooperation far beyond the established governments' control or wishes. It is is too early to test these ideas, one has to take notice of the role played by Arab expatriates in Kuwaiti politics, in the Mecca rebellion of 1979 or in the Iraqi war effort as examples of these emerging networks. The last example — the Iran–Iraq war — and the Arab view of it is, however, too important to be dealt with through the peculiar case of a few thousand Arabs fighting with the Iraqis. Special attention is indeed needed.

THE IRAN–IRAQ WAR

It is clear that the Iraqi government has largely proved unable to mobilise most of the Arab world in its war with Iran. Gradually and understandably, Iraqis became very sensitive to this topic, as well illustrated by 80-year-old Siddiq Shanshal in a Tunis conference (1982), or by many Iraqis in the first conference of the Arab political scientists' association in Cyprus (1985), not to mention the outbursts of official rage in the Iraqi government-owned media against an indifferent Arab world or, more specifically, some 'Arab traitors'. Iraqi frustration is real, deep and growing, and has been only partly compensated by consistent Jordanian support, Egyptian overtures and the financial help offered by the GCC countries.

This lack of Arab support could be explained by general as well as by specific causes. In the first category, one has to mention the general political apathy in the Arab world, resulting largely from the systematic repression, limitations on the freedom of speech and the exclusive monopoly Arab governments tend to seek over anything political. Many Arab governments have 'organised' demonstrations against Camp David in a way which was so clearly manipulated that genuine opposition to the Accords was muted in order not to give this or that regime additional and undeserved 'legitimacy'. Governmental

control tends to become 'natural' after a certain passage of time. Sigmund Freud has indeed demonstrated that censorship, applied over a period of time, 'naturally' becomes self-censorship and repression of the expression of political opinions 'naturally' leads to depoliticisation.

Another general factor is embedded in the disintegration of the Arab world into a number of local sub-systems, where ideological pan-Arab themes have been replaced with closer, more immediate geopolitical considerations. All Arab states seem to be too busy with their immediate environment to be able to pay attention to distant wars. Algeria and Morocco have seen the Saharan issue become an almost exclusive preoccupation. Libya is involved in Chad and other ventures. Sudan and Somalia have to face newly Marxist Ethiopia. In this sense, Iraq's location at the oriental end of the Arab world did not help in its mobilisation of Arab opinion. Other conflicts are raging (Palestine, Lebanon, Sahara, Yemen, the Horn of Africa) or still await a solution. A new, sudden, distant, albeit devastating one could hardly push into oblivion the other closer conflicts.

Political apathy and the disintegration of pan-Arab politics should not overshadow more specific reasons for this lack of enthusiasm for Iraq at war. One factor in this respect is the lack of perception of revolutionary Iran as a threat to the Arab lands. Persian expansionism into Iraq or across the Gulf is little known outside the Gulf. Under the Shah, this expansionism (Oman, Shatt al-Arab, Kurdistan, the UAE islets of Tunb and Abu Musa, etc.) was too heavily ideologised as a pro-American undertaking to be viewed as a modern illustration of secular Iranian ambitions. Iraq's successive regimes' extremism and isolation did not help in this respect, especially in view of the millions spent by the Shah on pro-Iranian propaganda in the Arab media. As a potential threat, Iranian expansionism could hardly be as clearly perceived as Israeli expansionism.

The present Iraqi government's presentation of the conflict did not help correct this situation. This presentation was triumphalist at the beginning, and too defensive in the later period. In the first weeks of the war, Baghdad did not hesitate to acknowledge its responsibility in taking the initiative to 'liberate' Arabistan. Books and pamphlets were distributed to demonstrate the Arab character of Khuramshahr/Muhammara and of Abadan; hints that this oil-rich Iranian province could be annexed were

not dismissed and the war was pompously named 'Saddam's Qadisiya', while Iraqi-inspired media were hinting that Baghdad could create a situation where it could impose its Iranian allies as the new rulers of Iran.

But as the war dragged on, and as the Iraqi troops were moving too slowly to justify such a triumphalist vocabulary, the official tone was abruptly changed into a defensive one. The Iraqis changed the date of the outbreak of hostilities, claiming now that the war actually began with an Iranian attack on Iraqi territory on 4 September 1980 and that their attack on 20 September was in fact a preventive move against a larger Iranian offensive. They now clearly affirmed that they did not intend to disrupt the territorial status quo in any way and buried much of their printed literature on the Arab character of the Khuzistan/Arabistan province. They now wanted a quick end to the war and the cessation of Iranian expansionism.

This ambiguity in the presentation of the war (in so many Iraqi-subsidised pan-Arab magazines, as well as in Iraqi official media) added to earlier lack of perception of Iran as a threat. This was all the more aggravated by the fear of many Arabs of losing Iran as a (at last) friendly neighbouring country. In 1980, when the war erupted, the Iranian Revolution did not yet 'devour its children'. The Revolution itself was viewed by many as the model for popular rebellions against dictatorial regimes, as a success in the search for cultural and political 'authenticity' and as a deserved disaster for the United States. Others, even those who did not share this admiration for 'the model', at least recognised that the new regime would be more supportive of the Arabs in their struggle against Israel. A PLO office was indeed inaugurated in Tehran and Arafat was welcomed there as a hero. Revolutionary Iran seemed to compensate for 'the loss of Egypt' in the war with Israel. This picture has certainly been substantially altered in a later period when the regime will appear as a rather authoritarian 'mullocracy', eager to adopt a clearly shiᶜi profile, to buy military spare parts from Israel and to quarrel with the PLO. But this was not the case yet in 1980–81 and the Iraqis were then often perceived as the squanderers of a new precious friendship.

This condemnation of Iraq was also justified by the clear signals, complacently relayed in the international press, that a new Nasser had appeared in Iraq. The personality cult that was meant to propel Saddam Hussein as the new leader of the Arab

world probably ran against the prevailing boredom with oversized pan-Arab leaders. Other Arab leaders were opposed to this cult, and most Arabs seemed little moved by it. It was even counter-productive since the war was perceived by some as an unjustifiable endeavour to gain personal pre-eminence, on the part of the Iraqi leader who, a few months earlier, had deliberately broken the six-month truce with Syria, given himself high military titles and taken over Iraq's presidency from his relative and ally, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr.

These factors were aggravated in the classical Arab-left circles by the new diplomatic line taken by Iraq in the late 1970s which was illustrated by the tough treatment of the Iraqi communists after years of cooperation with the Baᶜth, or by the Iraqi condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The war was therefore clearly met with reservations on the part of the Soviet Union as well as on the part of countries like Syria, Libya, Algeria and South Yemen (PDRY).

This lack of opinion polls does not allow for a real assessment of Arab public opinion. This also applies to the Iran–Iraq war. It is not, however, risky to affirm that a change took place somewhere in 1983–84, when the mixture of indifference and of anti-Iraqi views was replaced by a new attitude where the fear of 'a shiᶜi threat' became politically relevant. Iranian victories in the war, Iranian-inspired violence in the Gulf and Tehran's public endeavour to interfere with Iraqi politics (not to mention the emergence of Lebanon's shiᶜa as a big factor in this country's politics), together formed a new source of fear, more of a shiᶜi general affiliation than of Iranian expansionism. This fear was strong enough to draw Egypt and the PLO to the Iraqi side, and to move the Gulf public opinion into a more active anti-Iranian (if not pro-Iraqi) attitude. Fighting around the Palestinian camps in Beirut was now linked to the battles raging on the Shatt al-Arab, equally expressing what a young sunni notable of Beirut has called 'the sunnis' new fear of Lebanon, which is part of the sunnis' situation in the whole Arab world'.[10] This fear could not but be reinforced by Iranian activism during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, or by inflammatory statements such as this young pro-Iranian Iraqi shiᶜi leader's warning that 'the real war between the Muslims and Europe has not started. You have not realised what will happen when the real war starts.'[11]

A dormant political cleavage was hence resurrected, to be

considered by some as the *summa divisio* in the Middle East. But is this a transient or a more permanent factor, is it a temporary fever or a long-awaited historical movement finally taking place? It is rather ironic to see that this cleavage looks like a central one in political discourse at a time when the Iraqi people's national unity has proved to be quite resilient, and when Gulf shiʿa have become less active, at least as shiʿa. As expressed by Nikki Keddie and Juan Cole:

> Our finding that Shiʿis have in recent years been generally more successful in social protest than have Sunnis does not mean that the shiʿi–sunni division will continue to be as important in assessing social protest movements as it has been in the past two decades. One might equally surmise that now that shiʿis have forced sunni or sunni–Christian governments to deal with some of their grievances, they may continue to be less oppositional in countries like Iraq and Saudi Arabia, or they may increasingly unite with non-shiʿis to work or fight for the same causes.[12]

In any event, despite the presence of small shiʿi minorities in their populations, GCC countries could not be considered as important actors in this new cleavage, whatever its depth or its resilience. They would certainly be affected by a clear Iranian victory as well as by a clear Iraqi one. But if either one of the two belligerents is ever allowed a clear victory by the superpowers, it would not have an automatic impact on the GCC regimes' survival, as it might have in Iraq. Hence, despite a widespread rebuttal of Syria's (or Libya's) reasons for siding with Iran, one could hardly hear in the GCC the kind of condemnations of Syria that are conveyed by the Iraqi press. In the GCC media, Palestinians are allowed to criticise Syrian behaviour in Lebanon but it is not common to find an equal impatience with the Syrian position in the Iran–Iraq war. There are political and security considerations that could explain this reluctance. But one could also feel that the GCC governments do not want their criticism of Syria (or Libya or Algeria) to be used to draw them back into the heart of inter-Arab polemics.

THE ARAB/ARABIAN DIVIDE

The two examples (Gulf resources, the Iran–Iraq war) we have been discussing also show a high degree of manipulation of perceptions and loyalties by the existing regimes. It is evident that in most of the Arab countries the regime, directly or in more subtle ways, is in control of the means of political socialisation from school books to TV stations, newspapers and slogans on the walls. Political regimes may choose to bring the issue of 'the Gulf' to public attention. Examples could be found in some of Nasser's speeches, in Sadat's bitter criticism of Saudi Arabia after 1975, or in a 'demonstration' against the Kuwaiti embassy in Damascus. Regimes in most Arab countries also determine the amount of attention to be given to oil prices or the Iran–Iraq war. Damascus's uneasy alliance with Iran explains why this topic is given little coverage in the Syrian press. Oil revenues have to a certain extent lowered the public interest in the Gulf since many Gulf leaders preferred to pay for other Arabs' lack of interest in their problems. More money was given to publishers in Beirut to induce them not to print, than was given to journalists to write. Gulf leaders seem to think that another Arab writing about them is more likely to be negative than laudatory, hence the less said, the better.

But people do not stop thinking because they read less. It is certain that the oil boom has altered the view Arabs have of the GCC countries. 'Backwardness', 'authenticity', 'Bedouinism', have been largely replaced by 'wealth', 'overspending' and, possibly, 'arrogance' as the words one hears most often when the GCC countries are mentioned. There is a fear that these countries could turn their backs on the rest of the Arabs, by failing to use 'the oil weapon', by refusing to give financial aid, and by organising themselves as an autonomous group within the GCC. There is a good deal of envy of a group of states that is so wealthy and has, moreover, proved capable of establishing a sub-regional organisation–the GCC–that seems to be more promising, or at least less crippled, than the Arab League and other pan-Arab organisations.

A more isolationist policy in the GCC countries would affect the well-being of many Arabs. On the other hand, it is the security of the Gulf which is affected by Arab politics, and Gulf people often point to this imbalance. They would say that the most that Arabs could complain of is a lack of funds, while their

internal stability and their regional security are permanently affected by such (non-Gulf originated) factors as: the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Iran–Iraq war, the Egyptian intervention in Yemen, the inter-Yemeni conflict, the Syrian–Iraqi feud, the Soviet presence in the PDRY, etc. Gulf intellectuals often observe that aid given by their countries was often used in military spending, or as a price for reconciliation of two Arab countries and not on economic development. The underlying idea could be summarised as follows: (1) conflicts in which other Arabs are involved are numerous and dangerous; (2) GCC countries are helping in their solution; but (3) they do expect not to be dragged into them. On the other hand, it is not easy to convince the GCC people that Iraq is defending them against Iran, or Somalia against Ethiopia, or Syria against Israel. They tend to be critical of the way other Arab states tend to trigger conflicts they are not strong enough to deal with successfully.

But among the GCC countries, Saudi Arabia obviously occupies a very special position. This is not a small, vulnerable and wealthy emirate but an active regional actor, involved in Arab politics long before its transformation into an oil-bonanza. It is evident that mutual perceptions are strongly affected by the actual behaviour of the Saudi kingdom in regional politics. But Riyadh itself often sems to hesitate between interventionism outside the Arab peninsula, and a policy of retrenchment within this much more manageable, though limited environment.[13] In recent years, retrenchment appeared to be gaining ground due to the Saudi inability to produce the long-awaited American-sponsored acceptable solution to the Palestinian problem, to the Iraqi self-appointment as the leader of the Arab containment of revolutionary Iran, to the Egyptian isolation in the Arab world, and to the stronger than ever American support of Israel. It is possible that this prudent policy is more consistent with Abd al-Aziz's behaviour than with the policies followed by the kingdom in the 1950s and the 1960s. The net result is an enlarged gap between what is Arabian and what is Arab. The existence of this gap has always been a central objective in Saudi regional policies, in general devised to deny access to the Arabian peninsula to all non-peninsular (including Arab) actors. Saudi leaders observe with relief that no Egyptian troops are intervening in Yemen, no Iraqi generals are threatening Kuwait, no Iranian troops are stationed in Oman, and this largely compensates for

Saudi failures outside the peninsula.

This limited involvement in Arab politics is feasible as long as other Arabs are handicapped by their 'predicament'. Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries could follow this policy of relative retrenchment only because the Arab regional system has shifted from an era of ideological polarisation into a situation where Arab actors primarily feel the constraints of their most immediate geopolitics. All Arab states seem to be too busy dealing with their direct environment to really participate in pan-Arab politics. The Arab League has been further weakened by its transfer to Tunis and the difficulty of convening Arab summits. Syria has its hands full in Lebanon and Iraq is completely absorbed by the war. Egypt is isolated and Libya weakened by unsuccessful foreign adventures, the decline in oil prices and American threats. The Sahara conflict absorbs much of the attention in the Maghreb. Loyalties and perceptions have been equally narrowed down and this trend has been little altered by Muslim revivalism which is more concerned by the implementation of the *sharīʿa hic et nunc* than by grandiose schemes of Islamic unity.

Until the day when the Arab system is reorganised along more credible political lines, Gulf regimes have an easy job convincing their populations that involvement in Arab politics is a sterile and a dangerous game. They have an equally easy job explaining to other Arabs that they would be part of any consensus that could emerge in the future. Gulf countries' consistent conservatism and relative isolationism are also there because other Arabs do not have any more credible arguments against these policies. In view of the repression, civil wars, poverty and crazy adventures in most of the Arab world, is it not almost pleasant to live in Doha or in Kuwait?

NOTES

1. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Ittijahat al-Ra-i al-Amm al-Arabi nahwa Mas'alat al-Wahda* (Trends in Arab Public Opinion Towards the Arab Unity Issue) (Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1980).

2. Levon Melikian and Lutfi Diab, 'Group Affiliations of University Students in the Arab Middle East', *Journal of Social Psychology* (1959), pp. 145-59; Levon Melikian and Lutfi Diab, 'Stability and Change in Group Affiliations of University Students in the Arab Middle East', *Journal of Social Psychology* (1974), pp. 13-21.

3. P. Starr, 'The October War and Arab Students' Self-Conceptions', *Middle East Journal* (1978), pp. 444-55.

4. Tawfiq Farah, 'Group Affiliations of University Students in the Arab Middle East (Kuwait)', *Journal of Social Psychology* (1978), pp. 161-5.

5. Faisal al-Salem, 'The Issue of Identity in Selected Arab Gulf States', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* (1981), pp. 21-32.

6. Edward Shils, 'Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties', *British Journal of Sociology* (1957), pp. 130-45; Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States', in C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States* (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1963), pp. 105-57.

7. See, for example, David D. Laitin, 'Hegemony and Religious Conflict: British Imperial Control and Political Cleavages in Yorubaland', in P.B. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), pp. 285-316.

8. A necessary discretion prevents closer identification of the speaker.

9. See note 8.

10. Tammam Salam, *Al-Majallah*, 21 May 1986.

11. Sayyid Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, *Le Matin*, 23 May 1986.

12. Juan R.I. Cole and Nikki Keddie (eds), *Shiʿism and Social Protest* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986), p. 28.

13. See my *Al-Siyasa al-Kharijiya al-Suʿudiya mundhu 1945* (Saudi Foreign Policy since 1945) (Maʿhad al-Inma' al-Arabi, Beirut, 1980), especially Chapter 10.