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## **The New Arab Diplomacy: Not With the U.S. and Not Against the U.S.**

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ■ MOSCOW ■ BEIJING ■ BEIRUT ■ BRUSSELS

Middle East  
Program

Number 94 ■ July 2008

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## Summary

Many Arab countries traditionally aligned with the United States are showing increasing reluctance to follow Washington's lead in addressing regional problems. This tendency toward an independent foreign policy is particularly evident among the Gulf countries. Even states that host major U.S. military facilities on their soil, such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain, consider U.S. policy in the region counterproductive and are forging a new diplomacy.

Gulf countries have refused to enter into an anti-Iranian alliance with the United States, and have chosen instead to pursue close diplomatic contacts with Tehran, although they fear its growing influence. They are trying to bring about reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, while the United States is seeking to isolate Hamas. They have helped negotiate a compromise solution in Lebanon, while the United States has encouraged the government to take a hard-line position. Yet, the new diplomacy of the Arab countries is not directed against the United States, although it contradicts U.S. policies.

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The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent fragmentation of the country have left a vacuum of power in the surrounding region that Iran is trying to fill. The Bush administration's vision of diplomacy as a reward for good behavior by friendly countries, rather than as a tool for dealing with difficult ones, has left a diplomatic vacuum that Arab regimes are seeking to fill. Even Arab regimes that want to maintain good relations with the United States are distancing themselves from U.S. policies and are trying to step into this vacuum. Qatar and the Arab League have negotiated a solution to the standoff between Hizbollah and the U.S.-supported March 14 alliance in Lebanon that contradicted U.S. policy. Saudi Arabia in the past and now Egypt and the Arab League are trying, in defiance of U.S. policy, to bring Hamas and Fatah together in Palestine. In general, a growing web of diplomatic initiatives and contacts is being spun throughout the Gulf and the Levant, and the United States is not part of it.

This diplomatic activity is not directed against the United States, nor is its outcome necessarily detrimental to U.S. interests, even when it clearly contradicts U.S. policies. Rather, it seeks to address in a different way problems that the United States has not prevented from festering. The hard-line, confrontational policy the United States has embraced under the Bush administration has inadvertently demonstrated the limits of U.S. power. The United States enjoys complete military superiority vis-à-vis any one country at any one time, but it cannot use force simultaneously everywhere it would like to impose its

will—wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have already stretched U.S. military resources thin. Furthermore, many difficult issues—sectarian strife in Lebanon, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict—would not be amenable to a military solution even if the United States had the resources. The rejection of diplomacy has thus reduced the United States to a condition of self-inflicted powerlessness regarding many problems. The vacuum is being filled in part by U.S. adversaries—Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hizbollah—and in part by friendly Arab regimes, which seek to find a way forward in situations where U.S. policy has contributed to stalemate.

While the intensity of Arab-initiated diplomatic activity is striking, it is still difficult to discern an overall pattern to it or a clear plan by the countries of the region of what they want to accomplish. There is little doubt that the policy favored by the United States—the building of a grand anti-Iranian alliance led by the United States and including the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council plus Egypt and Jordan (the so-called Arab moderates) has found no takers. But these countries have no intention of turning against the United States. They essentially mistrust both the United States and Iran: They fear that the U.S. policy of confronting Iran puts them in danger of Iranian retaliation, but they also fear the unchecked power of Iran. As a result, their policies remain tentative.

In this new regional diplomacy, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a major player while Egypt has sidelined itself in the waning years of the Mubarak regime, turning inward while it waits for the succession—and possibly a succession crisis—to unfold. An extremely cautious country, historically unwilling to rock its relationship with the United States, the Kingdom has been pursuing an unusually independent and, by its standards, assertive policy. But so have some small countries, particularly Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

## The Problems

This paper will focus on the regional diplomatic activity concerning three issues: the rise of Iran and with it of Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas; the aggravation of the Palestinian–Israeli crisis as a result of the split in the Palestinian ranks between Hamas and Fatah; and the increased tension between Hizbollah and the “March 14” forces—the majority faction supported by the United States—that has brought Lebanon close to civil war. The United States has proved unable to suggest viable solutions to any of these problems. Furthermore, most Gulf countries and even Egypt no longer believe the Bush administration can contribute to solutions because of its unwillingness to talk to and negotiate with all sides and to help forge compromises. Indeed, in all three situations the United States has openly taken sides and thus cannot act as a broker. As a result, regional actors have tried to step into the vacuum, not, however, as a unified group with a clear plan, but in a rather piecemeal, ad hoc fashion.

The diplomatic activism of the countries of the region goes beyond these three issues. Turkey has plunged into the maelstrom of the Arab–Israeli peace process, becoming the key mediator in the renewed negotiation between Syria and Israel and taking on a role traditionally monopolized by the United States. Egypt, despite its predominantly inward focus at the moment, has been forced to become involved in Gaza, with which it shares a border, negotiating a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas that took effect on June 19, 2008. And every country bordering Iraq has its own policies—which are not always in harmony with U.S. plans—on how to deal with the problem on its doorstep. The analysis presented here thus does not claim to be exhaustive, but it simply provides an overview of the way in which some traditional U.S. allies not known for strong foreign policy initiatives are refusing to follow the U.S. lead in dealing with Iran, the split in Palestinian ranks, and the turmoil in Lebanon.

### **Saudi Arabia**

The general thrust of Saudi policy on all three issues can be summed up as avoidance of confrontation and reliance on diplomacy to smooth the Kingdom's own relationship with Iran and reliance on diplomacy and negotiations to help restore some cohesion to the Palestinian side and relaunch negotiations in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Saudi Arabia has found it more difficult to maintain its balance—and King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz his patience—vis-à-vis Lebanon and Syria. Saudi Arabia has emerged as a strong supporter of Saad al-Hariri and the March 14 coalition. Although it has tried not to simply write off Syria as an Iranian stooge but to bring it back to the Arab fold, Saudi Arabia has found that policy difficult to pursue consistently.

Iran potentially poses a direct threat to Saudi Arabia and undoubtedly challenges it in the power balance in the region. The two countries fall on different sides of all regional divides, whether Arab/Persian, Sunni/Shi'i, or pro- or anti-American. Saudi Arabia is a militantly Sunni country—many Wahhabi clerics condemn Shi'a, a significant minority in the kingdom, as heretics, in defiance of the king's efforts to include them in a national dialogue. It is an Arab country, which has historically vied with Egypt for leadership of the Arab world. And although religion is a central political factor in both Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia has excluded clerics from the direct political role they have played in Iran since the overthrow of the shah and has limited their influence to the social and educational spheres. Finally, Saudi Arabia has historically been close to the United States, a country Iran has viewed as the Great Satan since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were quite confrontational during the 1980s, when the Kingdom supported Iraq in its war with Iran. In 1988, Riyadh even severed diplomatic relations with Tehran. It cited as reasons the riots involving Iranian pilgrims during the 1987 pilgrimage to Mecca, in which more than 400 people were killed; a subsequent attack on the Saudi Embassy

in Tehran; and Iranian threats against navigation in the Gulf. Relations between the two countries started thawing after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989 and particularly since the election of President Muhammad Khatemi in 1997. Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait also helped improve relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, because Saudi Arabia sided against Iraq, a development Iran welcomed even if it meant the stationing of U.S. troops on Saudi soil. As a result, in April 2001 Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a security and cooperation pact, agreeing to conduct joint efforts to combat crime, terrorism, and money laundering as well as to cooperate in the surveillance of borders and territorial waters. The pact was largely symbolic, but it showed a definite thaw in relations between the two countries.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran nevertheless remained difficult. There is a built-in rivalry between the two major countries on the opposite sides of the Gulf (to the point where they cannot even agree on the name; it is the Persian Gulf to Iran and the Arabian Gulf to Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries). And there is an inherent danger for Saudi Arabia in the presence of a militantly Shi'i regime in the neighborhood: Saudi Shi'a, a minority concentrated in the oil-producing eastern region, still suffer from discrimination and King Abdullah's recent efforts to open a dialogue with them is unlikely to bring about rapid change in their status and in the attitude of most Saudis.

The end of the Saddam regime in 2003 made the challenge of Iran greater. It eliminated the major regional counterweight to Tehran and unleashed sectarianism. Shi'a, the more numerous group, and Kurds, the best organized, gained in influence in Iraq while Sunna, who had neither numbers nor organization after the collapse of the Baath Party and state institutions, were sidelined. Growing Shi'i power in Iraq made it easier for Iran to increase its influence. Shi'a who had sought refuge in Iran during Saddam Hussein's tenure in power, organizing political parties and militias while there, returned to Iraq. New Shi'i organizations, most importantly the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr, emerged as important political forces. Shrewdly, Tehran hedged its bets, providing some support for all major Shi'i groups and their militias.

Two conflicting viewpoints emerged in Saudi Arabia about how to handle growing Iranian influence. One, supported by Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, the national security adviser and former longtime ambassador to Washington, embraced the U.S. line that countries of the region must take a firm stand against Iran. The Saudis in particular should be ready to provide support, even weapons, to Iraqi Sunna if they risked being overwhelmed by the rising Shi'i and Kurdish tide. This idea, reflecting a point of view being advanced in Riyadh, was presented explicitly by Nawaf Obaid, an adviser to the Saudi government, in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* on November 29, 2006. It was immediately disowned by the Saudi government, indicating the triumph of the king's less confrontational view that Iran indeed represented a threat, but one that Saudi

Arabia should contain by diplomatic engagement, not confrontation. At least some Saudi officials privately welcomed the U.S. hard-line stance, fearing the rise of a nuclear-armed Iran. In public, however, Saudi Arabia chose to distance itself from U.S. policy in the hope of avoiding Iranian retaliation should the U.S. or Israel mount an attack on Iran.

The king's approach put Saudi Arabia at odds with the United States. By the fall of 2006, Washington was beginning to face two major unforeseen—though not unforeseeable—consequences of the invasion of Iraq, namely the rise of sectarian tensions inside the country and of Iranian power in the region. Iraq had been on the verge of civil war, if not already in one, since the bombing of the Askariyya Mosque, a major Shi'i shrine, in Samarra in February 2006. It was a failed state, precariously held together by the American presence, and thus incapable of counterbalancing Iranian influence. If Iran was going to be contained, Washington believed, neighboring countries must enter into an alliance with the United States. Saudi Arabia disagreed, and so did other Gulf countries.

Beginning in the fall of 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice undertook an effort to form an anti-Iranian coalition of “moderate”—which is to say, Sunni—regimes. After several months of desultory meetings, beginning at the United Nations in September, Washington managed to bring together the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as Egypt and Jordan—the GCC+2—at a meeting in Kuwait on January 17, 2007. The meeting produced what *Washington Post* correspondent Glenn Kessler uncharitably called a “vague piece of paper” that did not name Iran (or Syria, Hizbollah, or Hamas) but proclaimed the participants' common commitment to “regional security and peace.”

While going along unenthusiastically with the U.S. plan, King Abdullah was concentrating on spinning a web of diplomacy not only with and around Iran, but around the other major crises of the region: the renewed sectarian tension in Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005; the subsequent forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon; the growth of Hizbollah power after the summer 2006 war with Israel; the victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian elections; and the fallout from the subsequent refusal by the international community to recognize the Hamas government and of the U.S. attempt to bolster Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas against the Hamas prime minister and cabinet. In all these crises, Saudi Arabia tried diplomacy, with varying degrees of success. While the diplomacy was not directed against the United States per se, the Saudi efforts in all of these cases were at odds with the policy of the Bush administration.

In the wake of the summer war between Hizbollah and Israel, which Israel failed to win, Saudi Arabia opened a dialogue with Iran to reduce tension in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia was hardly nonpartisan in Lebanon. It was a major supporter of the Future Movement, the Sunni party led by Saad al-Hariri, Rafiq's

son, and of the so-called March 14 coalition gathered around it. The United States also supported the March 14 forces. Syria and Iran, meanwhile, backed Hizbollah and the so-called March 8 coalition, which included Hizbollah, some small pro-Syrian parties, and, in a strange twist of Lebanese politics, the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, a previously strongly anti-Syrian Maronite leader. By the end of 2006, Hizbollah was openly defying the government, paralyzing the parliament, and making it impossible for the cabinet to function except in a de facto caretaker capacity. While backing the same side in the confrontation, Saudi Arabia and the United States pursued opposite policies. The United States urged the March 14 government to stand fast against Hizbollah, Iran, and Syria. It also increased its support for the Lebanese military under the Foreign Military Financing program from nothing in 2005 to \$9.6 million (requested) in 2008. The king promoted a series of meetings with Iran to try to calm the situation in Lebanon and possibly in Iraq, culminating in early 2007 in an encounter between the heads of the respective national security councils, Ali Larijani for Iran and Prince Bandar bin Sultan for Saudi Arabia.

The focus of Saudi-Iranian contacts soon broadened. In March 2007, King Abdullah and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad met face-to-face in Saudi Arabia, apparently without a clear agenda or outcome. By that summer, the king had developed an agenda, trying to weigh in on the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions. Iran was continuing to defy the International Atomic Energy Agency as well as the United States and Europe by pursuing its efforts to master the fuel cycle and satisfy on its own the requirements of the nuclear power plant it was building—or, as other countries suspected, its ambition to build nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia proposed that Iran and all Gulf countries that had announced their intention to develop nuclear energy sources work together to develop a common facility, in a neutral country such as Switzerland, to provide fuel for the entire region. It was a suggestion Iran was bound to reject, as the Saudis undoubtedly realized. But it was also a declaration by Saudi Arabia that countries of the region should tackle issues affecting them all on their own rather than on U.S. terms. Also in defiance of the U.S. stance, the king continued to deal with Iran and its controversial president as an integral part of the region. Ahmadinejad took part in the pilgrimage to Mecca as well as in a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (to which Iran does not belong) in December.

While pursuing its contacts with Iran, Saudi Arabia also tried to intervene in Palestine, working on two fronts: reconciliation between Palestinian factions and the peace process. The king tried, and for a while succeeded, in bringing about a degree of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, inviting them to talks in Mecca in February 2007. The talks resulted in the Mecca agreement that opened the way to the formation of a government of national unity. While the king was working on the Mecca agreement, the United States was helping to arm and train security forces under the direct control of President Abbas.

In March 2007, during an Arab League summit, Saudi Arabia also sought to relaunch the Arab Peace Initiative that Abdullah had first proposed at the 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut when he was the crown prince. The proposal reiterated the long-standing Arab demand for a return of Israel to the pre-1967 borders and for the recognition of refugees' right to return; however, it added as a quid pro quo the new offer of a comprehensive peace agreement and normalization of relations between Israel and all Arab countries. The proposal was dismissed in 2002 by both Israel and the United States, neither of which showed any interest in exploring to what extent the demands on borders and refugees were negotiable. The same thing happened in March 2007. In fact, in April 2004 the Bush administration wrote a letter to Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister at the time, in which the United States appeared to recognize the right of Israel to maintain control of parts of the occupied territories and to reject the return of refugees to Israel.

The Mecca agreement soon fell apart as well. Although Fatah and Hamas formed a government of national unity, Hamas's Ismail Haniyya was still prime minister and Hamas still refused to formally recognize the state of Israel, although the platform of the unity government hinted, without stating explicitly, that the government would abide by agreements with Israel negotiated by the Palestine Liberation Organization and ratified by the Palestinian National Council. The United States and the European Union did not recognize the government as legitimate, and thus neither lifted its sanctions. Furthermore, the United States continued its deliberate efforts to drive a wedge between Haniyya and Abbas. The inevitable consequence was a falling-out between Hamas and Fatah, which led to much violence in Gaza during June 2007, the dismissal of Haniyya as prime minister by President Abbas, and the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, while Fatah remained in control of the West Bank. Saudi efforts had thus come to naught, leaving Hamas and Fatah more hostile than ever, Gaza and the West Bank under different authorities, and the Palestinians without effective government or leadership that could speak for all of them. The Saudi policy of reconciliation had failed in this instance not only because of the intractability of the underlying problems, but also because the United States and Israel wanted confrontation in the hope that Fatah would defeat Hamas.

Even when faced with this setback, Saudi Arabia by and large remained consistent in its conciliatory position on all regional crises. The exception was in its relationship with Syria, which repeatedly thwarted Saudi efforts to bring Hamas and Fatah together and to stabilize Lebanon by resolving the impasse that prevented the election of a new president. Lebanon was the major point of friction between the two countries, because they backed opposite factions. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia could afford to be more hostile to Syria, which had limited power, than to Iran, which was truly dangerous. In addition, the defiant and arrogant attitude of Bashar al-Assad, the young president of Syria (and son

of longtime leader Hafez al-Assad), probably was personally offensive to the king. As a result, Saudi Arabia showed less tolerance of Assad than it did even of Ahmadinejad. Despite its impatience toward Syria and its partisanship on Lebanon, however, Saudi Arabia eventually did try to seize opportunities to lure Syria back in the Arab fold and to reduce tension in Lebanon.

After the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri—which the Syrian regime was suspected of masterminding—and the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, as already mentioned, threw its support behind Hariri's son. Saad al-Hariri, widely seen as a prime target for assassination, did not take the position of prime minister, which would normally have gone to him as the head of the major Sunni party, and instead spent much time outside Lebanon, mostly in Saudi Arabia.

Syria was an equally strong supporter of Hizbollah. Furthermore, it backed Hamas against Fatah in Palestine, while Saudi Arabia was trying to promote reconciliation. Aggravating the situation, at least concerning Lebanon and Palestine, Syria for a long time simply refused to play even superficially the game of diplomacy and accommodation, which even Iran had decided to take up. Paradoxically, while maintaining an uncompromising position on these issues, in 2007 Syria opened a line of communication with Israel, through Turkey, and was exploring the possibility of reviving peace talks in the hope of regaining control of the Golan Heights, which were captured by Israel in 1967.

The first major difference to emerge between Syria and Saudi Arabia was on the issue of the tribunal to try suspects in the al-Hariri assassination. Saudi Arabia backed the setting up of the tribunal. Syria, a main suspect, opposed it and supported the efforts of the Lebanese March 8 forces to keep the Lebanese parliament from meeting and ratifying the formation of the tribunal. As a result, an international tribunal under UN auspices was set up instead, bypassing the need for a vote by the Lebanese parliament. Again, Saudi Arabia backed the formation of the tribunal while Syria obviously opposed it, although it could do nothing to stop it. Saudi Arabia, together with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, even declared their readiness to help finance the tribunal—a move that worsened the tension between Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Relations between the two countries improved somewhat after the 2007 Arab League summit, because Syria supported the Saudi effort to relaunch the peace initiative, then worsened again that August, when Syrian Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa made disparaging remarks about the Saudis' ambition to play a regional role and their inability to do so. Attempts to patch up the public spat with a visit to Riyadh by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem failed. The meeting was called off at the last minute because of continuing disagreement over Lebanon—Saudi Arabia was calling for the immediate election of a new president, while Syria sided with Hizbollah in demanding that the election be contingent on the adoption of a new election law and the enlargement of the opposition's role in the cabinet.

The crisis that erupted in Lebanon in May 2008 brought relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria—and between the king and Assad—to the lowest point yet. The resolution of the crisis through negotiations sponsored by Qatar and the Arab League quickly changed the dynamics of the region, however, leading to a concerted effort by the smaller Gulf countries to reintegrate Syria. At the beginning of June, Assad visited the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, amid rumors that Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE were trying to arrange a reconciliation meeting in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh with the participation of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Although the meeting did not materialize, the issue of reconciliation remained on the agenda. At the same time, France moved to improve its relations with Syria, with President Nicolas Sarkozy sending senior diplomats to Syria, with whom relations had been chilly since al-Hariri's assassination, and inviting President al-Assad to visit Paris in July. Saudi Arabia remained aloof from this activity.

The thrust of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy under King Abdullah that emerges from this overview cannot be considered to be either anti-American or in any way extremist. Indeed, the goals of Saudi Arabia and the United States often converge: Both worry about Iranian influence, and both have been angered by Syria's defiant attitude and do not trust the regime. However, they have followed fundamentally different policies in dealing with the problems. The king has sought to avoid confrontation with Iran, to bring Syria back into the Arab fold, and to promote reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. The United States has sought to isolate Iran and Syria and to build coalitions against them, while trying to force Palestinians to turn against Hamas by imposing sanctions and isolating Gaza. Saudi Arabia has chosen what the Bush administration calls appeasement. The United States has chosen what Saudi Arabia considers dangerous confrontation.

Internal contradictions in the two countries' policies have complicated their relationship. Saudi Arabia, open to diplomacy and dialogue with Iran, has also kept the al-Maliki government in Iraq at a distance because it is dominated by Shi'a and Kurds and is too close to Iran. Like most other Arab states, Saudi Arabia has not opened an embassy in Iraq. The United States strongly opposes Iran but at the same time supports the al-Maliki regime, which Iran also supports. The United States has little choice—it created the al-Maliki regime. Whatever the reasons, the ironic result is that the United States and Iran are the only countries with strong relations to the Iraqi government, which is still shunned by Arab regimes whose support Washington courts. (Though with much prodding by the United States, the United Arab Emirates finally announced in June 2008 it would open an embassy in Iraq.) The contradictions and paradoxes do not end here. The Saudis want no part in the openly confrontational U.S. policy toward Iran and have contributed to the failure of the GCC+2 plan. But they also want the United States to continue standing up to Iran, in a sense playing “bad cop” to the Saudi “good cop.”

The tension between Saudi Arabia and the United States goes well beyond disagreement on specific tactics and personality differences between a king who believes in diplomacy and a president who believes in the exercise of power. The underlying problem is a fundamental shift in the relationship between the two countries. The old oil-for-security relationship developed when Saudi Arabia was a country of a few million inhabitants and no economic assets other than oil wells. Today, Saudi Arabia has a population of 27 million, including more than five million foreign workers, and is rapidly diversifying its economy. After the first oil price increase in 1974, Saudi Arabia could not absorb or manage on its own the large influx of petrodollars and invested much of it in Western banks. Today, the Saudis are investing heavily in diversifying their domestic economy, while sovereign wealth funds and other government-controlled financial institutions buy up assets in the United States and Europe. With China and India joining the ranks of industrialized countries, Saudi Arabia no longer depends on the West to sell its oil, nor does it depend on any one source of weapons to bolster its defense forces. Greater Saudi independence in its foreign policy is inevitable. Yet the United States and Saudi Arabia remain essentially on the same side in every conflict in the region.

### **The Smaller Gulf Countries**

An unexpected recent development is the emergence of some of the smaller Gulf countries as extremely active participants in the new regional diplomacy. Faced with the growing ambitions of Iran, U.S. policies they consider dangerous, and a growing number of regional crises that the international community seems incapable of addressing, countries that never played an important international role are taking it upon themselves to do something. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have become particularly active.

The most successful example of this new activism so far has been the conclusion on May 21, 2008, of the Doha Agreement among rival organizations in Lebanon. The agreement opened the way for the long-delayed election of the president and the formation of a government of national unity, pulling Lebanon away from the brink of open conflict. (Although the election of the president took place immediately, however, bickering over control of specific ministries among the factions was still preventing the formation of a government at the end of June.) The agreement was negotiated in Qatar, with Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani, the prime minister and foreign minister, taking a leading role, along with the Arab League, in mediating. The agreement was not welcomed by the United States, because it implied recognition of the growing power of Hizbollah and the weakness of the March 14 forces supported by the United States. The United States had been advising the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora for months to hold fast and not make any concessions to Hizbollah, a policy that left Lebanon paralyzed.

Qatar's role in negotiating an agreement that contradicted U.S. policy and was poorly received in Washington is particularly revealing of the paradoxes of the new regional diplomacy. On the one hand, Qatar has particularly close ties to the United States: It hosts a large CENTCOM prepositioning facility and a U.S. air base and has not objected to their being used to pursue the war in Iraq. On the other hand, Qatar continues to show a great deal of independence on many issues. Doha-based al-Jazeera, the most watched satellite television news network in the Arab world, is critical of the United States and broadcasts information, such as communiqués from Osama bin Laden, that the United States would prefer to keep off the air. Qatar maintains strong diplomatic relations with Iran and in December 2007 took the initiative in inviting President Ahmadinejad to participate in the twenty-eighth summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Doha. Nothing concrete came out of the meeting—Ahmadinejad was more interested in promoting a defense alliance between Iran and the Gulf countries than in discussing specific issues such as Lebanon and Palestine, and was certainly not interested in discussing Iran's dispute with the United Arab Emirates over three small islands in the Strait of Hormuz. The message sent by Qatar and other countries to the United States, however, was unmistakable: Iran is an integral part of the Gulf region; it cannot and should not be isolated. The same message was again conveyed a few days later in very clear terms by most Gulf participants in a Gulf Security Conference organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates came under intense criticism at the conference in Manama, Bahrain, for highlighting the danger of a nuclear-armed Iran while refusing to acknowledge that Israeli weapons also posed a problem for the region. In the words of the Qatari prime minister, "Iran is our neighbor, and we shouldn't really look at it as an enemy."

Success in negotiating the Doha agreement among the Lebanese rivals has also prompted other initiatives by Qatar and other small Gulf countries. At the beginning of June, the Syrian president was invited to visit the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. This was not a particularly significant event in itself—high-level visits had been exchanged before—but the trip was accompanied by persistent rumors that the two Gulf countries and Qatar wanted to arrange a reconciliation meeting among Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Syria, for its part, made a small contribution to its own reintegration in the Arab fold by hinting that it wanted to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon. That would be a highly symbolic step, because Syria has never fully recognized Lebanon as an independent state.

The chain reaction of diplomatic initiatives quickly extended to Palestine as well, although in this case the leading role was transferred again from the small Gulf countries to big players like Saudi Arabia and the Arab League. In early June, Abbas, the Palestinian president, showed a new willingness to open

talks with Hamas by dropping the precondition that Hamas relinquish control of Gaza. Hamas responded positively. That opened a flurry of activity in the region, with Abbas visiting Saudi Arabia and Egypt and consensus appearing to develop that the Arab League should be the facilitator of the talks, possibly to avoid competition among countries of the region and the proliferation of uncoordinated initiatives.

### **Egypt and Jordan**

Neither Egypt nor Jordan has been playing a major role in the new diplomacy of the region, to a large extent because of both regimes' vulnerability. Aid-dependent and politically fragile because of the large number of Palestinians in its population, the Jordanian regime has mostly remained a quiet ally of the United States, neither applauding U.S. policies nor denouncing them. And while it has not opposed the initiatives of other Arab countries toward the problem discussed here, Jordan has not embarked on any initiatives of its own. Egypt has also kept a low profile in the new diplomacy of the region, probably a temporary phenomenon, given the country's historical prominence in Arab affairs, its long-standing rivalry with Saudi Arabia for leadership, and its sheer size. At present, however, Egypt is consumed by domestic challenges: It faces the end of the 27-year reign of Hosni Mubarak; a likely succession crisis as his son and heir apparent Gamal is neither well-respected by the security apparatus nor well-liked by the public; and growing unrest fueled by high unemployment and rising prices. When Jordan and Egypt have taken positions or pursued initiatives, however, they have shown the same reluctance to accept U.S. policies as the Gulf countries.

Differences between the United States and Jordan concerning Iran have become particularly noticeable. In late 2004, King Abdullah II appeared to be on the same page as the United States. He warned at the time about the growing danger of a "Shi'i crescent" that went from Iran to Syria and Hizbollah in Lebanon, passing through Baghdad, where elections had brought to power a Shi'i-dominated government. But in the years that followed, the king softened his anti-Iranian stance. In a September 2006 interview with *Time* magazine, he still hinted that the expansion of Iranian influence was a looming danger, but he emphasized that the major threat to the stability of the Middle East was the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict. But by June 2008, in a new interview with the *Washington Post*, he deliberately played down the Iranian threat, steadfastly refusing to rise to the bait repeatedly offered by the interviewer. "Iran poses issues to certain countries," he stated, "although I have noticed ... that the dynamics have changed quite dramatically, and for the first time ... Iran is

less of a threat.” The real threat, he repeated, was the failing peace process, and a military strike against Iran would only invite retaliation.

Egypt has refrained from taking strong positions on regional issues unless they directly affect Egypt. Although its diplomats do not hide their strong distrust of Iranian ambitions, Egypt has not joined the United States in strongly condemning Iran—but neither has it made a serious attempt to engage with Iran. It has not become directly involved in the attempt to move the Lebanese political process forward but has participated only indirectly through the Arab League, over which it still has much influence. And it has hosted a large number of regional meetings in Sharm el-Sheikh, symbolically confirming Egypt’s continuing centrality.

However, Egypt has been the prime mover concerning the Gaza Strip only because the crisis there affects it directly. The schism between Fatah and Hamas, and Hamas’s control over Gaza, have created an extremely dangerous situation for Egypt, the only Arab country that borders Gaza and thus the only one that can provide relief to the population when Israel halts the flow of goods. But Egypt cannot afford to become the prime supplier of Gaza, for fear of becoming permanently saddled with the responsibility, a situation that many Israelis would welcome.

The danger of the situation for Egypt was highlighted in late January 2008 when Gazans, in a concerted move backed by Hamas, breached the barrier separating Gaza from Egypt and poured into Rafah, returning with needed supplies. Egyptians had little choice but to allow the border to remain open for almost two weeks, until it negotiated with all sides a way to close it without violence. The problem is far from solved for good, however. As long as Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups continue to shoot rockets into Israel from Gaza and the Israelis retaliate by tightening the blockade, Egypt will always face pressure to reopen the border at least temporarily or will be threatened with the possibility of another violent breach.

The need to find a longer-term solution prompted Egypt to overcome its recent diplomatic inertia and take the leading role in negotiating a cease-fire agreement between Hamas and Israel. After months of efforts, an agreement finally went into effect on June 19, 2008. It committed Hamas (but not Fatah) to stop attacking Israel from Gaza and Israel to reopen the crossings into Gaza. The United States was not involved in these negotiations and greeted the cease-fire without enthusiasm—the best reporters could pry out of a State Department spokesman on June 17 when the cease-fire was announced was a statement to the effect that the United States welcomed anything that kept more Israelis from getting killed.

## Conclusion

This brief overview of the new Middle East diplomacy suggests three conclusions. First, the United States now has little leverage over the policies of even friendly countries. So-called U.S. allies that harbor U.S. military facilities on their soil are openly refusing to follow the U.S. lead in dealing with Iran, Syria, and the conflicts between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, or between Hizbollah and the March 14 forces in Lebanon. In addition, of course, all the Arab countries are at odds with the United States concerning Palestine. Second, there is no overarching vision that underpins the new regional diplomacy, at least for the time being. And third, the center of gravity in the Arab region has shifted eastward, and that change is likely to be permanent.

Many essentially friendly countries are openly willing to pursue policies the United States disapproves of, presenting Washington with a fait accompli and the choice of either openly criticizing the action of its so-called allies or grudgingly tolerating it. That is what happened, for example, in the case of the agreement among the Lebanese factions negotiated by Qatar and the Arab League, and in the inclusion of Iran in regional meetings.

The question going forward is whether the new assertiveness and diplomatic activism, and with them the divergence from U.S. policies, will continue. This is a question of great importance to the new U.S. administration. Except in the case of Egypt, the foreign policies of the countries we have been discussing are not highly institutionalized but depend heavily on the position taken by individual leaders, so they could easily change. Saudi policy could be very different after the death of 84-year-old King Abdullah. However, Gulf countries are now rich, much more developed, and courted by many countries that want their oil, gas, and investment, and thus are less likely to simply follow the U.S. lead without questions. Whether the policies of these countries will diverge from those of the United States depends as much on U.S. choices as on theirs. The diplomacy of the region has not been based on extreme positions. A U.S. administration more inclined to use diplomacy and less likely to denounce talks as appeasement might very well find the new diplomacy helpful.

The new diplomacy so far does not appear to be based on an overarching vision for the region but rather on a desire to reduce imminent threats and the level of conflict. The new diplomacy has not been directed at establishing a new security framework for the area or at promoting grand overall solutions. The Arab initiative is an exception in that it tries to offer an overall solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, but it is dead in the water. Regional institutions that try to provide unified responses to regional problems, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, are limping along as they always did. The most successful initiatives so far have been those addressing specific issues—the election of a president and formation of a government of national unity in Lebanon; a first,

and possibly soon a second, agreement between Hamas and Fatah. More ambitious projects, such as the Saudi proposal to create a joint facility for producing nuclear fuel, have not gotten any traction.

The center of gravity in the Arab world has moved eastward to the Gulf, in a shift that is likely to be permanent. The major actors in the new diplomacy are Gulf countries. The Maghreb is totally absent. The Levant is the source of the problems to be solved—conflict in Lebanon, the reintegration of Syria, the issue of Palestine—not the source of solutions. Egypt will probably become a more vigorous participant in the regional diplomacy once it emerges from the succession doldrums. But it will never again lead the region intellectually—there are now too many sources of information and ideas. And economically, Egypt will simply not be able to compete.

The shift in the center of gravity has long been in the making, the cumulative effect of increased Gulf oil wealth and of problems elsewhere that have festered. But the political implications have become clear only as a result of the upsetting of the regional balance of power precipitated by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent rise of Iran, as well as by other U.S. policies perceived as not providing solutions.

Washington has so far tried to ignore the implications of the new regional diplomacy and the loss of its own leverage in the region. As a result, it has suffered repeated defeats. It has failed to build the new anti-Iranian alliance it sought. It has been unable to stop regional initiatives that undermine its own policies. It has been openly rebuffed by oil-producing countries uninterested in increasing oil production to control prices. Seeking to impose on countries of the region an approach they have repeatedly rejected will merely continue to isolate the United States. The challenge for the next U.S. administration will be to understand how to become part of this regional process so as to remain a player.







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