In the Gulf, A Shifting of Power Is Underway

BY ELIE CHALALA

Regardless of what the UN-sponsored peace talks lead to, the eight-year old war already has starkly changed the Gulf. Gone are the days when Iran could play a hegemonic role there, and so too has passed the era of Iraqi radicalism in Middle Eastern politics.

Although an Iranian threat was evident as far back as 1971, when the Shah seized the Arab islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tumbs in the Strait of Hormuz, the Arab states in the Gulf did not appear to take it seriously. Their policy, adopted early in the war by the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), was one of non-neutrality” – which meant supporting Iraq in words and money only. One of the principal results of the fighting has been to change the GCC’s perception of Iran’s interests. What was once an abstract threat had become quite concrete, and thus the policy of mere rhetoric and financial support of Iraq is likely to be reevaluated.

Illustrative of this, and an indicator of things to come, is the rush to arm. Earlier this year, Saudi Arabia bought, from China, CSS-2 ballistic missiles capable of striking targets more than 1,600 miles (2,500 kilometers) away. This was followed by a major arms accord with Britain, estimated at about $29 billion. Kuwait followed suit by heavily arming itself and diversifying its arms suppliers.

With peace, Iran may regain international respect, strengthen its army, and re-emerge as a regional power. But in light of the wholesale military buildup undergone by the sparsely populated Gulf states, the balance of power already has shifted enough to diminish the possibility that Iran will again become as powerful in the Gulf as it was under the Shah.

The Arab states, from Kuwait at the Gulf’s tip to Oman at its mouth, were easily intimidated in the past. Today, Iraq’s upper hand at this stage of the war, and their stock of weapons, boosts their morale and encourages them to stand up to challenges. Qatar’s snubbing of the Reagan administration, in refusing to surrender its quietly
acquired Stinger missiles, was only the most recent evidence of this new-found boldness.

The question the United States must now ask is whether to attempt to maintain Gulf security through a continued and permanent presence, or whether to assign this task, as in the past, when patrolling the Gulf was the duty of the Shah. The latter choice – essentially the Nixon Doctrine – as now complicated by the absence of a single, hegemonic power. Realities dictate that if the U.S. fleet is not to become a permanent part of the seascape, Gulf security must involve the Arab states as a group – the GCC – in equal partnership with Iran.

Iraqi radicalism has been another casualty of the eight-year war. Its long-heard Baathist polemics – calling for the overthrow of “reactionary” Arab states, the “stooges of imperialism,” and the unification of the Arab world under the Baathist banner – is now history. In a recent interview with al-Tadaman, an Arab weekly, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein said: “I have changed my view on the concept of unity. I am an Arab first, and Baathist second. What we need is the unity of hearts and minds. The unity between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Yemen is stronger than the [since-ended] constitutional union between Egypt and Syria.”

Symbolic of this change in perspective is the fact that it was Iraq that played a key role in expelling Egypt from the Arab League in 1979 after Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David agreement, and that in the last two years it was Iraq that was a leader in bringing Cairo back to the Arab fold.

In welcoming back Egypt, Iraq and the Gulf states had found it counterproductive to continue excluding the strongest and most populous Arab country from formulating policies to deal with the Gulf war. Whether Egypt’s re-admission to the fold would be translated into military support against Iran, the symbolism was not lost: it served to increase Iranian anxiety and, no doubt, is significant in Iran’s reticence to continue occupying some Iraqi territories.

Perhaps the most striking effect of the war is Iraq’s move toward the U.S. position regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. Speaking in October to Milton Viorst of The New Yorker magazine, Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s deputy prime minister and foreign minister, made an unprecedented statement of moderation toward Israel. Asked if Iraq still insisted that a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict be acceptable to all parties, he answered: “Definitely not.” He added: “We long ago stopped giving lectures to the Palestinians, Jordanians, and Syrians about what to do regarding the conflict with Israel. If the Palestinians accept an accommodation, why should we object?”

Considering that the one-time bedrock notion of Baathist ideology was that Palestine, including Israel in its 1948 borders, was an inseparable part of a unified Arab nation, Mr. Aziz’s statements suggest that Iraq has come a long way. The statements made by Iraqi officials also show how old ideas became too costly a burden to bear in this new era.

As in the aftermath of most wars, the results were not fully intended by the belligerents; they materialized in the course of battle. Likewise, reversing them is as problematic as predicting their occurrence.