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Abstract

The gradual reconstitution of state control and legitimate political authority in Iraq presents local and regional actors with a range of new challenges at a time of considerable tension in the Arab world. The Iraqi polity gradually began to re-cohere in 2008 following the traumas of the US-led invasion in 2003 and the sectarian civil war between 2005 and 2007. As this process gathered momentum, an array of new, and unresolved existing, issues threaten to undermine the fragile veneer of stability in Basra and southern Iraq. These include the nature of the domestic and regional ties and networks of individuals and organizations binding Basra both to the rest of Iraq and to its broader Arabian/Persian Gulf hinterland. Hence the challenge for policy-makers in Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is how to smooth Iraq's re-entry into regional affairs following two decades of isolation and mutual mistrust, and three decades of conflict and under-development.

This paper examines the challenges and connections between Basra, southern Iraq and the Gulf. It begins with a historical assessment of the flows of people, goods and ideas during the formative period of state-building and consolidation in the region. The creation of national boundaries and identities disrupted traditional patterns of trade and generated new fault-lines. Oil, and a contentious boundary dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, sharpened these tensions and culminated in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The 1991 Gulf War and subsequent decade of containment likewise culminated in the 2003 US-led occupation of Iraq. The second section of this paper analyses the occupation of Iraq and the multiple causes of state failure and proliferating violence in Basra. This and the final section on future challenges explore the domestic and regional issues that complicate the ongoing processes of reconstruction and recovery in southern Iraq and its relationship with its regional hinterland. These include flaring tensions with Kuwait, enduring friction with Saudi Arabia, and the volatile geopolitics of regional insecurity more generally in the light of the new pressures generated by the Arab Spring.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The city of Basra is situated at the head of the Gulf at the juncture of the Euphrates and Tigris waterways. It benefits from a strategic location astride the major land and seaborne trading routes radiating from Iraq westward to the Arabian Peninsula, eastward to Iran and by sea to Gulf ports, India and beyond. Historically, this has been both a source of lucrative positional rent and a magnet for local and regional contestations of power. Beginning in Ottoman times and continuing through the period of the British mandate and the monarchical era, Basra was characterized by a cosmopolitan and externally oriented outlook. This coexisted (sometimes uneasily) alongside the gravitational pull of Baghdad and trade with the interior. During the nineteenth century, a series of Ottoman administrative reforms and improvements to

communications created networks of political and economic linkages that drew the three provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul into a loosely defined regional entity (Marr 2004: 22). These planted the seeds of an Iraqi national identity that, significantly, pre-dated the creation of the modern state of Iraq in 1921. It also proved resilient enough to defeat a separatist Gulf-oriented political movement in Basra in the 1920s, which suffered from weak leadership and a narrow social base of support (Visser 2005: 84–8).

Connections with the Gulf sheikhdoms proliferated alongside the burgeoning Ottoman ties. Leading Basrawi merchant families established branches in Arabistan (now Khuzestan), in Kuwait and in Persia and formed part of a broader regional market encompassing central and eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, southern Mesopotamia and the northern Persian coastline (Fattah 1997: 1). Kuwait's ruling Al-Sabah family and other regional notables were major landowners in Basra before the First World War. Acquisitions of substantial estates of date-palm groves along the banks of the Shatt al-Arab waterway contributed significantly to Kuwait's economy and lessened its vulnerability to poor harvests or disruption to pearl diving (Slot 2005: 12). Significantly, the revenues from the date gardens acquired by the Al-Sabah family since the early nineteenth century also provided them with a measure of autonomy from Kuwait's powerful merchant families. This removed a major domestic constraint on their exercise of power by changing the balance of power between competing social groups within Kuwait (Rush 1987: 175).

In the aftermath of the violent leadership succession in 1896, factional infighting within the Al-Sabah family drew on these connections in Basra, as supporters of the murdered ruler (Sheikh Muhammad al-Sabah Al-Sabah) sought to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the new ruler (Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah Al-Sabah) by appealing to the governor of Basra for assistance. They included an influential Basrawi entrepreneur, Youssef bin Ibrahim, who projected himself as a potential ruler who would position Kuwait firmly within the Ottomans' sphere of influence (Tetreault 1991: 570–1). These machinations failed, and Mubarak went on to consolidate his position and, known as Mubarak the Great, to become the 'founder of modern Kuwait' (cf. Slot 2005).

Dense commercial links also developed between Basra, seaports on the Arabian and Persian coastlines of the Gulf, and Bombay. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local shipbuilders and sailors constructed and navigated the *dhow*s and *booms* that sailed each year from the Gulf to the Indian subcontinent and along the coastline of east Africa. They exchanged cargoes of Arabian ponies, dates and pearls for goods such as rice, timber and cotton as intricate patterns of intra- and inter-regional trade developed (Villiers 2006: 26). By

1914, Britain (and the British Raj in India) had emerged as Basra's largest trading partner, and a 'century of commerce and diplomacy' established its hegemony over the coastal Arabian sheikhdoms in the Gulf (Coates Ulrichsen 2007: 353). A web of maritime, economic and social connections bound the peoples and ports of the Gulf into a 'civilizational unit' whose parts had more in common with each other than with the major inland centres of Riyadh, Baghdad or Teheran (Potter 2009: 1, 8).

1.1. The rise of modern states, 1921–80

Following the creation of the modern Iraqi state in 1921, the imposition of state boundaries cut across established trade patterns linking Basra with the Arabian Peninsula and Persia's Gulf coastline. The new borders clashed with traditionally fluid conceptions of space and social mobility in the Arabian Peninsula (Schofield 2011: 28), in which 'sheikhly authority' over particular areas changed over time and was vulnerable to shifting tribal allegiances and the dynamic interplay between internal and external factors (Onley and Khalaf 2006: 204–5). Significantly, the interwar decades witnessed the emergence of centralizing states in Saudi Arabia and Iran as well. Divergent political trajectories in Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia transformed the dynamics of the regional system in the Gulf. The rise of modernizing states in Iraq and Iran shifted the centre of gravity in the Gulf away from the British-protected sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula. The gradual centralization of authority following the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 similarly changed the balance of power on the peninsula itself, away from the coastal city-states (Gause 2010: 6).

Consolidating state structures interfered with the web of cross-waterway linkages as new political boundaries and identities developed. The new Iraqi state made recurring expansionary statements about Kuwait. Claims of territorial sovereignty over Kuwait originated in differing interpretations of the Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement in 1899 and the Anglo-Ottoman Convention in 1913 that defined the limits of Ottoman jurisdiction in the Gulf. In December 1922, the Uqair Protocol defined the boundaries between the then-British mandate of Iraq, Kuwait and what would later become Saudi Arabia. Although the established border was accepted by Kuwait and Iraq in 1923 and reaffirmed in 1927, Iraqi leaders periodically claimed Kuwait as Iraq's 'nineteenth province' (Casey 2007: 55–7).

Many Kuwaitis continued to travel to Basra for their higher education, and the emerging print media and radio formed another bond. In the 1930s, a small Association of Gulf Arabs opened in Basra to promote unity between the two countries (Said Zahlan 1998: 36). Matters came to a head during the 1938 standoff in Kuwait between the ruler, Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber

Al-Sabah, and the (short-lived) Legislative Council The leaders of the reform movement were influenced by Iraqi policies of fostering Arab nationalism and political and socio-economic reforms throughout the Arab world. Their enthusiasm was mirrored by a spate of Iraqi media attacks on Kuwait and its ruler, calling on Iraq to ‘take action and do its best to save Kuwait from danger’ (Salih 1992: 93). One of the (many) causes of the movement’s downfall was the March 1939 arrest and execution of a Kuwaiti citizen who called for Iraqi intervention in order to overthrow the Al-Sabah (Tetreault 1991: 577).

Immediately after Kuwaiti independence in 1961, the Iraqi prime minister, Abd al-Karim Qasim, declared it to be an ‘integral part’ of Iraq, and necessitated the intervention of 7,000 British troops to forestall any putative invasion (Smith 1999: 116, 120). Relations normalized following the overthrow of Qasim in 1963 and a final agreement that year in which Iraq recognized the sovereignty of Kuwait, but the Ba’ath party continued Qasim’s more activist policy of encouraging (and clandestinely supporting) what they saw as ‘progressive’ movements in the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, periodic incidents and harassment continued, including a massing of Iraqi troops on the Kuwaiti border in 1973, culminating in an Iraqi attack on a Kuwaiti border post that killed two Kuwaitis (Peterson 2011: 41–2; Roberts 2011a: 91).

Political developments in Iraq and Iran presented ideological as well as material challenges to Kuwait and the smaller Gulf sheikhdoms. They thus differed from the hegemonic challenge from Saudi Arabia, which despite the periodic flare-up of boundary tensions with its smaller neighbours did not present an ideational threat to the political survival of the similarly traditional Gulf monarchies, with the exception of a short-lived claim on Qatar in 1935 by King Abdul-Aziz (Coates Ulrichsen 2011b: 24). In Iraq, the July 1958 military coup bloodily overthrew the pro-British ruling elite and triggered a thoroughgoing political and social revolution that empowered a radical new set of political and military elites (Franzen 2011: 85). The following years saw a late example of the ‘exit’ options once open to individuals and communities feeling under threat by local rulers. Many wealthy Sunni Arabs of Nejdi descent living predominantly in the town of Zubayr (close to Basra) chose to return to Saudi Arabia in opposition to the socialist policies implemented after the republican takeover (Visser 2006b).

In Iran, the Shah entertained grandiose and increasingly interventionist ambitions of attaining hegemony in the Gulf following his restoration in 1953 and revived a longstanding claim on Bahrain (Halliday 2005: 103). This continued into the immediate post-revolutionary period when the Islamic Republic challenged the political and religious legitimacy of the Arab

Gulf monarchies and initially attempted to export its revolutionary ideals. Khomeini himself stated that monarchical and secular-nationalist forms of governance were incompatible with the requirements of 'Islamic governance' (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 29). Iranian agents were also implicated in plots to destabilize internal security in Bahrain in 1981, Saudi Arabia in 1984, and Kuwait in 1985 and again during the 'tanker war' in 1987–8 (Gause 1994: 60).

These events fundamentally reshaped the international relations of the Gulf and introduced into the regional mix expansionist actors with designs on parts of the Arabian Peninsula (Louis 2006: 893). This occurred during a state of flux in the British-protected security system in the Gulf. On 16 January 1968 the British government declared it would withdraw from its military commitments east of Suez by the end of 1971. This sudden reconsideration of defence priorities reflected a combination of economic stringency, the accelerating pace of decolonization in the 1960s, and the setback in Aden in 1967 (Sato 2009: 101). The decade that followed the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 presented existential dangers to the nascent Gulf States.¹ Local perceptions of vulnerability were visibly underscored when Iran seized the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs from the emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah on the day before the withdrawal of British protection (Davidson 2005: 49).

Consequently the decade between the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War and the American enunciation of the Carter Doctrine in 1980 saw intermixed local and regional threats. The rulers of the newly independent Gulf States were caught between their three larger and powerful neighbours yet lacked the protection of an external security guarantor. During this period the prolonged revolutionary uprising in the Omani province of Dhofar (1965–75) reinforced Gulf States' feelings of regional threats to domestic security. This was further stretched by Iraqi involvement in the coup against the ruler of Sharjah in 1973, and in Baghdad's support for, and hosting of, revolutionary cells of the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman until 1975 (Davidson 2008a: 251; Valeri 2009: 60).

1.2. The Iran–Iraq War, 1980–8

Two trends characterized the period leading up to the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War on 22 September 1980. The first was the gradual rapprochement between Iraq and the Gulf States after 1975 while the second was Iran's pan-Islamist ideological threat to the Gulf States' internal security and external stability after 1979 (Gause 2010: 49–50). Iraq's foreign policy

¹ Aside from Kuwait, which gained independence in 1961, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (formerly the seven Trucial States) became independent in 1971.

became more pragmatic and shed its revolutionary and socialist strands as Saddam Hussein prioritized pan-Arabism as part of a bid for regional leadership. Iraqi normalization of ties with its Arab neighbours accelerated after the Camp David accord between Egypt and Israel in 1979 and the resulting ostracism of Egypt in the Arab world (Tripp 2002: 175–6). This stood in sharp contrast to the new Islamic Republic's rejection of the regional status quo following its rise to power in Iran in 1979. Iranian or Iran-linked agents were implicated in plots to destabilize internal security in Bahrain (1981), Saudi Arabia (1984) and Kuwait (1985) (Gause 1994: 90).

All six Gulf States² reacted to the outbreak of war with varying degrees of support for Iraq. This reflected their conviction that there was no effective alternative approach to dealing with the revolutionary threat to their polities. Alarm at the outbreak of military conflict was consequently tempered by concerns for domestic and regional stability and calculations that an Iranian victory would unleash forces beyond their capability to contain (Nonneman 2004: 173). This influenced the Gulf rulers' decision to create the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 1981. Its formation was an immediate and ad hoc reaction to the situation of profound uncertainty occasioned by the Iranian revolution and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War (Abdulla 1999: 154).

Although all six GCC states shared a desire to see an end to the war and avoid an Iranian victory, two camps nevertheless emerged. Their geographical position in the northern Gulf and greater intermixing of Sunnis and Shiites exposed Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to a range of material and ideological threats to domestic security. Attacks originating from both Iraq and Iran on oil infrastructure and commercial shipping demonstrated how internal and external aspects of security were intertwined as they threatened to disrupt the mechanisms of wealth generation and rent accrual that underpinned social cohesion in these distributive states. Instances of terrorism and political violence in Kuwait escalated sharply, including attacks against the US and French embassies and oil installations in December 1983 and an assassination attempt against the Emir in May 1985. These incidents raised internal tensions in Kuwait and highlighted the trans-national threats to Kuwaiti security, as the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility while the majority of those arrested were found to be Iraqi Shiites (Assiri 1990: 72).

Bahrain, too, witnessed acts of political violence and terrorism in the early 1980s. Most notable was an attempted coup in December 1981 plotted by the Islamic Front for the

² Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Liberation of Bahrain with clear links leading back to Iran (Said Zahlan 1998: 171).

Furthermore, the politicization of Shiite movements across the Gulf led them to articulate their own political ideologies into political organizations. This was strongest among the Shiraziyyin, followers of Mohammed and Hasan Al-Shirazi, scions of a prestigious Iranian clerical family based since the nineteenth century in the Iraqi city of Karbala. Increasing repression of political and religious dissidents in Iraq during the 1970s caused them to flee to Kuwait, while they also developed followings among Shiite communities in Saudi Arabia, as well as Bahrain (Louer 2008: 67–8). The Shiraziyyin believed at this time in exporting the Iranian revolution and played a central role in the creation of the Office of the Liberation Movements in Iran in 1981. This was tasked with coordinating armed operations against ‘oppressive rulers’ in neighbouring countries. In particular, it singled out Bahrain (along with Iraq) for its material and ideological suppression of domestic Shiite movements (Louer 2008: 179–82).

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia led the way in providing generous loans, financial assistance and oil- and non-oil support to Iraq throughout the war. This amounted to an estimated US\$25 billion from Saudi Arabia alone, and direct financial assistance was also forthcoming from Abu Dhabi and Qatar (Gause 2011: 178). Kuwait provided a further US\$13.2 billion in non-collectible ‘war relief subsidies’ as well as loans, and provided Iraq with vital deep-water facilities at its ports of Shuwaikh and Shuaiba. These enabled the overland flow of arms into, and oil out of, Iraq, thereby bypassing the Iranians’ naval supremacy in the northern Gulf. Kuwait City was only 150 kilometres from the war zone and Kuwait trade and commercial shipping was directly affected by this supremacy, and by the fighting more broadly, with its volume of trade reportedly falling by one-third as a result of the war (Assiri 1990: 69–71). However, a point of friction between Iraq and Kuwait involved the latter’s refusal of repeated Iraqi requests to lease the strategically important island of Bubiyan and thereby gain direct access to the Gulf (Nonneman 2004: 180).

Conditions in the lower Gulf lacked the immediate threat to security found in the northern states, both externally in terms of actual proximity to the battlefield, and internally in the absence of sizeable Shiite communities that they feared might become radicalized or manipulated by Iran. Policy-makers in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman sought to balance their limited financial and declaratory (through GCC communiqués) support to Iraq with continuing commercial relations with Iran. This delicate balancing act reached extreme proportions in the UAE, where Dubai, Sharjah and Umm al-Qaiwain supported Iran and maintained close trading links. The other four emirates of Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah,

Ajman and Fujairah all sided with Iraq, with Ras al-Khaimah offering Baghdad the opportunity to establish air bases on its territory (Davidson 2005: 206).

Divisions between the GCC on the urgency and nature of the threats posed by the Iran–Iraq War undermined collective approaches to addressing the conflict and paved the way for its internationalization. In November 1986, Kuwaiti officials requested the GCC to provide maritime protection to Kuwait’s oil tanker and merchant fleet, which was coming under sustained attack. They also called for the Peninsula Shield to station a contingent of Peninsula Shield troops on Bubiyan, partially to counteract Iran’s seizure of the Faw Peninsula the previous February, but also mindful of forestalling possible expansionary Iraqi designs on the island. Yet their request was declined owing to unwillingness to confront Iran politically or militarily, with Oman and the UAE displaying greatest opposition. Kuwaiti officials thus turned reluctantly to external powers to provide the maritime protection for its fleet, leading to the re-flagging and chartering of Kuwaiti vessels in 1987–8 (Assiri 1990: 101–2). Although the United States only acquired large-scale basing rights in the GCC states after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, developments between 1986 and 1988 brought a sizeable external naval force into the Gulf for the first time since Britain’s departure from the region in 1971.

The Iran–Iraq War therefore constituted a mixture of domestic and external threats to the GCC states. In some cases they intertwined, as in the Iranian-supported attacks inside Kuwait in the early 1980s. This interplay between regional actors and events and domestic political and social dynamics was significant in the context of heavily stratified GCC societies containing multiple actual or latent fissures. It was magnified by the fact that the three countries in the northern Gulf – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain – were less homogeneous and more vulnerable to internal and external pressures than their southern Gulf counterparts. Significantly, this interplay recurred again in 1990 when Iraq utilized parts of the *bidoon* (without citizenship) and Palestinian communities to facilitate its occupation of Kuwait (Boghardt 2006: 10).

1.3. The Gulf War and containment, 1990–2003

Decisions taken during the Iran–Iraq War had important implications for the Gulf States. The temporary convergence of Kuwaiti and Iraqi interests between 1980 and 1988 left unresolved a slew of boundary and territorial frictions. These included Iraq’s strategic desire for greater access to Gulf waters and lingering resentment over the Kuwaiti islands of Warba and Bubiyan. The two islands directly blocked the approaches to Iraq’s only deep-water port at Umm Qasr via the shipping lanes running through the narrow Khor Abdullah waterway. Umm

Qasr's increasing value to the Iraqi war effort owing to Basra's vulnerable location astride the front line with Iran increased these tensions still further. Iraq also experienced a financial crisis after 1988, attributable partially to its war debts to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but also to low oil prices, which Saddam Hussein suspected were the result of deliberate GCC states' policies (Nonneman 2004: 187).

All these issues provided elements of the basis for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, only two years after the end of the Iran–Iraq War. The legacy of the Iraqi invasion and the multinational liberation of Kuwait in January–February 1991 transformed the intra-regional and international relations of the Gulf. King Fahd's decision (under strong pressure) to invite more than 700,000 American-led troops onto Saudi soil and the retention after the war of up to 5,000 American soldiers in the Kingdom had momentous consequences for the mobilization of oppositional groups such as Al-Qaeda (Halliday 2005: 150). It also generated suspicions, extending beyond radical groups to encompass much intellectual and popular opinion, about American motives for remaining in the Gulf, and that US security interests were not necessarily aligned with the Gulf States' own best interests. Even in post-liberation Kuwait, feelings of frustration at US foreign and security policy in the Middle East led to talk of a 'smothering embrace' and feelings of unease that the United States did not act 'out of love for Kuwait ... if America defends its interests, then we have every right also to defend our beliefs and our principles' (Al-Shayeji 1997: 5).

The USA emerged from the Gulf War as the overwhelming military power in the region, as in the wider world. Successive presidential administrations under George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton designed a 'Dual Containment' policy that excluded Iraq and Iran from regional security structures (Buzan and Waever 2003: 201). The USA also deepened military relations with the GCC states through defence cooperation agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE (with the first two also being accorded Major Non-NATO Ally status in 2002 and 2004 respectively). GCC states became major logistical and command-and-control hubs for the US Fifth Fleet in Manama in 1995 and the forward headquarters of US Central Command (CENTCOM) in Doha in 2002. In addition, substantial stocks of military equipment were pre-positioned at air bases and ports in the UAE and Kuwait, and were the administrative and logistical lifeline for multinational forces in Iraq after 2003 (Gause 2010: 127).

'Dual Containment' did not lead to any sustainable or durable regional security architecture in the Gulf. The policy suffered from the binary opposition between American refusal to accept Iraqi or Iranian involvement in any regional framework, and these regimes' insistence on the withdrawal of external (American) troops from the region. This produced an

unbalanced system that lurched towards a third Gulf war in 2003 and continues to destabilize relations between Iran and the international community. Further, the permanent presence of US troops and bases in the Arabian Peninsula led to a growing divergence between political and public opinion as the American military footprint deepened throughout the 1990s. This arose partially as a result of the growing influence of Islamism as a social and political force in all GCC states after 1990, and it opened up an emerging gap between regime and public opinion (Coates Ulrichsen 2011a: 29).

These macro-trends of the rise of radical opposition to the US presence in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf converged on 11 September 2011 when Al-Qaeda attacked the USA. Seventeen of the nineteen hijackers who carried out the four attacks on New York and Washington DC were nationals of GCC states.³ This provided a sobering demonstration of their vulnerabilities to opposition to their political and security alliances with the USA. Saudi Arabia's projection of pan-Islamism paradoxically exposed it to contestation on the same grounds, as religious militants began to operate autonomously from state control (Hegghammer 2010: 14). Saudi Arabia, Dubai and other Gulf States played an active, if unwitting, role as hubs for illicit networks that underpinned the financing of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda. Indeed, a Council of Foreign Relations report in 2002 concluded bluntly that 'for years, individuals and charities based in Saudi Arabia have been the most important source of funds for Al Qaeda' (Council on Foreign Relations 2002: 1).

The launch of the third inter-state conflict in the Gulf in March 2003 therefore occurred within an intensely trans-national context. Accelerating supra- and sub-state flows of people, money and ideas facilitated new forms of ideational, non-state and cross-border affiliations that bypassed and undermined state structures. Al-Qaeda itself exploited globalizing flows of finance and people and utilized new technologies of communication as it prepared and carried out the attacks on 9/11 (Davis 2003: 1). Its use of the tools of globalization highlighted the dark underside of global interconnections and the existence of a profoundly regressive form of globalization. This threat magnified after the mid-1990s as new Arab satellite television channels broadcast daily footage of Muslim suffering elsewhere in the world and the internet became more widely available throughout the region after 1999 (Valbjorn and Bank 2007: 9).

³ Fifteen hijackers were from Saudi Arabia and two were from the UAE, in addition to one each from Egypt and Lebanon.

2. THE INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF IRAQ, 2003–10

The US-led overthrow of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 and the coming to power of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad ushered in a new political order in Iraq. However, post-occupation Iraq remained a zone of conflict and multiple insecurities as political and militia groups filled the vacuum created by the fragmentation of state structures and legitimate political authority (Dodge 2007: 88). The multinational forces that invaded and occupied Iraq in March–April 2003 lacked a coherent strategy to guide and direct post-war policy-making, and had inadequate material or financial resources. Moreover, the coalition adopted a deeply flawed counter-insurgency plan reliant on transitioning responsibility to an Iraqi government penetrated by sectarian interests, and not a politically neutral 'honest broker' capable of governing in the interests of all Iraqis. As David Kilcullen notes, this focus on transition before stabilization worsened the sectarian violence by increasing the state's capacity to project power (and violence), as protection and predation became two sides of the same coin, depending on ethnicity or sect (Kilcullen 2009: 126).

In these conditions of state fragmentation and the hollowing out of its administrative and (legitimate) coercive functions, the Iraqi government effectively ceased to function as a viable entity in control of the sum of its territory between 2005 and 2007. Disintegrative processes began to weaken in late 2006 when a tribal uprising in western Iraq escalated into a growing social movement as Sunni communities began to turn against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. As this movement spread along kinship lines it formed a critical element of the self-sustaining local security architecture in areas of Anbar province formerly among the most violent in Iraq (Kilcullen 2009: 158, 177). To his credit, General David Petraeus, appointed to oversee the 'troop surge' ordered by President George W. Bush in January 2007, recognized and assisted the 'Sahwa' (Awakening) Councils as they grew in number in 2007–8. The 'alliance of incentives' between tribal leaders and US civil and military leaders in Iraq delivered a fragile stability while leaving unresolved issues such as the movement's incorporation into, or coexistence alongside, Iraqi governing structures (McCary 2009: 44–5).

Notwithstanding the conducting of provincial elections in January 2009 and parliamentary elections in March 2010, a number of issues remain unresolved in Iraq. These were listed in a report issued by the Spanish think-tank FRIDE in January 2009 but still remain potential spoilers in 2012: division of power between federal and regional levels; distribution of oil revenues; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of militia groups; minority rights; and the status of Kirkuk and other disputed areas (Burke 2009: 2). To

this list must be added the nature and scale of the US military presence beyond their mandated Status of Forces Agreement on 31 December 2011. In addition, the nine-month process of forming a government after the 2010 election, and controversies such as the Independent High Electoral Commission's attempt to bar 511 mainly Sunni or secular candidates from running, indicate that the post-occupation political settlement remains volatile, with embedded elements of sectarianism remaining (Visser 2010). Yet Iraq as a national and political entity survived the sectarian carnage and dangerously simplistic support by influential American policy-makers (including current vice-president Joseph Biden) for 'soft partition' between its allegedly monolithic Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite communities (Visser 2008a: 95).

2.1. Overlapping conflicts and patterns of violence in southern Iraq

Although predominantly Shiite in population, sizeable communities of Sunnis (Arab and Kurdish) and Christians historically had made Basra 'a pluralistic, socially diverse city' of 1.3 million people with a history of inter-communal tolerance and outward-looking mentality (International Crisis Group 2007: 1). The city and eponymous province suffered considerably from its position on the front line during the Iran–Iraq War and from regime retribution following the abortive 1991 Shiite uprising. This, and the regime's destruction of southern Iraqi marshlands and subsequent collapse of the rural economy, triggered a large-scale migration of largely Shiite migrants who settled in neighbourhoods that after 2003 became strongholds of the Sadrist current (Cochrane 2008: 3). Socio-economic trends and political marginalization and neglect thus caused high levels of poverty and under-development in Basra and its environs. Throughout the 1990s, discontent simmered in rural communities in southern Iraq as 'lawless tribes fought a low-intensity battle with government forces in defence of their prerogative to engage in banditry and smuggling' (Knights and Williams 2007: 2).

After 2003, Basra's location at the head of the Gulf astride major commercial and smuggling routes subjected it to intense urban contestation by competing local groups and militias. A lack of multinational force resources, political will or coalition interest from Baghdad meant that competing militia groups dominated the local and regional landscape and battled each other for control of (and access to) scarce resources (Herring 2010: 197–8). The meta-narratives that dominated the period between 2003 and 2008 were these overlapping conflicts and low British capacity for (and interest in) state -reformulation. The United Kingdom assumed responsibility for Basra province and the three others (Maysan, Dhi Qar and Muthanna) in southern Iraq in March 2003. From the outset, British policy was

characterized by a lack of strategic vision and post-war planning. This failing covered both the military (which issued a divisional plan for post-conflict operations fifteen days before Basra fell on 6 April 2003) and the Foreign Office (whose unit for post-war planning was set up just three weeks before the invasion of Iraq commenced) (Ucko 2010: 133).

A series of British missteps and flawed policy decisions undermined the dynamics of post-conflict policy and reconstruction efforts in Basra. Officials were hampered by uncertainties over their legal responsibilities in their areas of occupation and by the rapid downsizing of force levels from 26,000 to 9,000 between May and July 2003 (Knights and Williams 2007: 6–9). Officials were also initially unaware of how poor conditions in Basra had become over decades of neglect, persistent conflict since 1980, and international sanctions after 1991.⁴ This inadequate understanding of local hierarchies and structures of power caused British officials to identify and work with partners that took advantage of the worsening security situation to advance their own interests and objectives. Meanwhile, the underlying problems of poor leadership, institutional fragmentation and inadequate cooperation between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence, and a confused mandate with insufficient resources, remained unresolved.⁵

In the autumn of 2006 the British attempted to coordinate civilian and military action in Operation Sinbad. This was intended to be a reconstruction-led operation closely aligned with reforms to the police and the rolling back of militia infiltration of the security services. However, its subsequent course epitomized the flaws running through the British period of administration of Basra. The six-month operation failed to address the structural causes of instability or make headway against the militias embedded in the city or its layers of governance. Moreover, concerns for security led to the evacuation of the British Consulate from Basra Palace and the (permanent as it turned out) withdrawal of its civilian staff. Nor did policy-makers attempt to build on the temporary lull in violence achieved by the operation, as it was immediately followed by an announced reduction in UK troop levels. During this period of late 2006 and early 2007, Britain's political focus moved elsewhere, and channelled civilian and military resources to the escalating campaign in Afghanistan (Ucko 2010: 142).

⁴ Testimony of Dr Nemat Shafik (Permanent Secretary, Department for International Development, 2008–9) to the Iraq Inquiry, London, 13 January 2010. www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/45193/20100113-shafik-final.pdf, accessed 7 December 2010.

⁵ Testimony of Sir Suma Chakrabarti (Permanent Secretary, UK Department for International Development, 2002–7) to the Iraq Inquiry, London, 22 January 2010. www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44193/20100122am-chakrabarti-final.pdf, accessed 8 December 2010.

By June 2007 a report by the International Crisis Group laid bare the full reality of the situation. It suggested that Basra ‘illustrates the pitfalls of a transitional process that has led to collapse of the state apparatus and failed to build legitimate institutions’, in which ‘periods of stability do not reflect greater governing authority so much as they do a momentary – and fragile – balance of interests or of terror between rival militias’ (International Crisis Group 2007: i). Of particular importance was access to oil and smuggling routes. The Islamic Virtue Party (Fadhila) controlled the Oil Ministry (until 2006) and the Oil Protection Force, as well as access to oil terminals and influence within the powerful oil workers’ trade union in Basra (Visser 2006a: 9–10). Conversely, the Jaish al-Mahdi (loosely controlled by Moqtada Al-Sadr) dominated the local police force and developed considerable influence in the Basra Port Authority. In addition, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) tightened its political grip at the provincial level after 2004 until its near-total electoral defeat in January 2009 (Williams 2009: 77–8).

Basrawi officials further faced political interference from governing elites in Baghdad in the work of, and level of resources given to, the South Oil Company. This state-owned, Basra-based company was responsible for nearly 80 per cent of Iraqi oil production before the 2009 licensing round. However, it made powerful enemies through its vocal opposition to the types of oil contracts envisaged in the auctioning rounds by Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki and (then) Oil Minister Hussain Al-Sharistani. Its director-general, Fayadh Nima, warned in June 2009 that they would ‘squander Iraq’s revenues’ and ‘put the Iraqi economy in chains and shackle its independence for the next 20 years’. Instead, he called for the South Oil Company to take the lead in rebuilding the Iraqi oil sector and redeveloping its technical skills and human capacity, and was removed from his position soon after (Muttitt 2011: 313).

Other challenges during this period included the arrival in Basra of more than 40,000 internally displaced persons fleeing the violence elsewhere in Iraq, pervasive street-level violence between rival militias, and tensions over the position of Basra within the Iraqi polity. Their effect was magnified by the poor socio-economic indicators (outlined above) and high incidence of poverty and unemployment. In these circumstances, organizations such as the Jaish al-Mahdi gained local support through providing welfare and services that constituted an existential safety net in the absence of state or other forms of support. Yet they also encouraged centrifugal tendencies and predatory competition with other militias such as the feared Shiite sectarian Thar Allah (‘God’s Revenge’) group, blamed for attacks against Sunni and Christian targets, the murder of ex-Ba’athist officials and the imposition of brutal ‘street justice’ (Rosen 2010: 372–3).

Different visions for Basra's position within Iraq also emerged following the passage of the Iraqi constitution in 2005 and parliamentary approval of a framework for creating federal regions in October 2006. Advocates of Iraqi nationalism now competed with supporters of a sectarian 'super-Shiite' region of nine southern provinces and adherents of a smaller, non-sectarian, uni- or tri-governorate federal entity based on Basra (Visser 2007: 25). These multiple approaches belied US notions of a monolithic 'Shiite bloc' in Iraq and confirmed the presence of Basrawi notions of Iraqi national identity that proved their resilience during the 1980–8 Iran–Iraq War. They translated into a lack of popular support for federalized alternatives to the centralized state after 2003. Such ambivalence was underlined in January 2009 when a petition organized by Basrawi parliamentarian Wail 'Abd al-Latif supporting a standalone federal region of Basra failed to get sufficient signatories to trigger a referendum on the issue (Visser 2009). Significantly (and foreshadowing to an extent the South Oil Company director-general's comments in June 2009), al-Latif called for a fairer distribution for Basra of locally generated oil income (Visser 2008b). In view of the fact that Basra province is estimated to account for 59 per cent of Iraq's proven oil reserves, and the four southern provinces together made up an estimated 71 per cent of proven reserves and over 95 per cent of government revenues in 2007, questions of local socio-economic development and wealth redistribution are likely to remain contested and emotive issues (Knights and Williams 2007: 1).

In late March 2008 Prime Minister Maliki launched the 'Charge of the Knights' (Sawlat al-Fursan) operation to rid Basra of militia control and re-establish central authority over the city. Although the sudden dispatch of 15,000 soldiers to tackle Jaish al-Mahdi strongholds took the Americans and British by surprise and ultimately relied on US air support for eventual success, it did have a powerful impact on Maliki's image within Iraq. It allowed him to project himself (somewhat improbably) as an Iraqi nationalist reimposing the structures of the state on hitherto lawless areas. In January 2009, his State of Law coalition triumphed in the provincial elections, taking twenty out of thirty-five seats in the Basra governorate, compared to five for ISCI and just one for Fadhila (Rosen 2010: 264–5). The operation also proved a turning-point of sorts for Basra as more than 20,000 Iraqi troops remained in the city and took the lead in reconstruction projects and neighbourhood patrols. These oversaw a dramatic fall in the levels of violence and encouraged the beginnings of infrastructural development and economic recovery (Ucko 2010: 148–9).

2.2. *The regional dimension*

Governments in the GCC states gave at least tacit support (and substantial logistical assistance) to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, their role as the logistical and administrative facilitators left them vulnerable to considerable levels of internal dissent against the invasion.⁶ In its most pronounced form, in Saudi Arabia, pre-invasion popular discontent revealed itself in opinion polls showing that 97 per cent of respondents adamantly opposed any cooperation with an American attack on Iraq (Furtig 2007: 638). Demonstrations against the war occurred in the other Gulf States as well, with those in Bahrain particularly well attended and prolonged. This placed policy-makers in the GCC in the awkward position of having to balance their security ties with the United States with high levels of popular opposition to the invasion. It prompted many to distance themselves publicly from the United States while privately offering some degree of encouragement and support to the effort to oust Saddam Hussein's regime. In March 2007, this security dilemma prompted King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to denounce the 'illegitimate foreign occupation' in an unprecedented public display of anger at the Kingdom's primary security partner (*New York Times* 2007).

Such elevated levels of public discontent at US actions in Iraq formed part of a larger chorus of anger at the Bush administration's Middle East policies more generally. In this environment, the GCC states might have expected significant blowback due to both their geographical proximity to Iraq and their leadership's military and political alliance with Washington. This notably did not happen, as the GCC states implemented hard security measures that ensured they remained relatively immune to the cross-border overspill of the multiple sources of insecurity, such as sectarian conflict, refugee flows and terrorist attacks (Pollock 2007: 16). Instead, the destabilizing flows of men and money largely ran in the other direction, from the GCC into Iraq. Between 1,500 and 3,000 Saudi militants joined the Sunni insurgency and constituted a significant proportion (up to 60 per cent) of the total number of foreign fighters in Iraq (Hegghammer 2007: 11). In Kuwait, members of two terrorist organizations, the Mujahideen of Kuwait and the Peninsula Lions, also channelled fighters to the insurgency, while a number of shootings and attacks on US personnel within Kuwait itself in 2002–3 caught the Kuwaiti authorities by surprise (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2006: 23). In addition, groups and individuals within Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states were suspected of providing large amounts of funding to the insurgent and terrorist organizations operating inside Iraq (Davidson 2008b: 156).

⁶ Kuwait became the logistical centre of the multinational forces while Qatar hosted the headquarters of CENTCOM and Bahrain hosted the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet.

With the direct threat from Iraq more or less contained, regional and international discourse focused instead on analyses of the geopolitical and strategic implications for the balance of regional power. This revolved around the perceived and actual expansion of Iranian influence following the removal of its main counterweight in the Gulf, and its consequences for the Shiite populations in the GCC (Carpenter and Innocent 2007: 67). The Sunni regimes in the Gulf States repeatedly expressed varying levels of alarm at the empowerment of Iraqi Shiites, which they feared could stoke unrest or greater political demands from their own Shiite communities. This was strongest in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain where it intersected with the legacy of uneven patterns of development and the politics of marginalization and discrimination (Coates Ulrichsen 2011a: 126). Thus, as early as February 2003, the Saudi Arabian foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, warned President Bush that he would be ‘solving one problem and creating five more’ if Saddam Hussein was removed by force. Subsequently, in 2005, the prince opined that the United States was ‘handing the whole country over to Iran without reason’ (quoted in Obaidi 2006). Saudi policy thus focused on preventing certain scenarios, such as the disintegration of Iraq or the complete disempowerment of its Sunni communities, by supporting Sunni Islamist movements within Iraq (Furtig 2007: 639).

The sectarian lens therefore constituted a powerful filter through which ruling elites throughout the GCC viewed developments in Iraq, particularly as the sectarian violence escalated after 2005. Officials and analysts in the Gulf States increasingly came to view the empowerment of Iraq’s Shiite majority and the rise in Iranian influence with intense suspicion. In particular, they viewed Iran’s cultivation of extensive ties with both state and non-state actors in Iraq as providing Teheran with a degree of strategic depth that stoked deep unease within the GCC. Led by Saudi Arabia, officials in the GCC deeply distrusted the Maliki government, which they suspected was an Iranian proxy and an ideational threat to their own polities (Sager 2008). This had significant implications in framing policy towards Iraq between 2003 and 2008. A self-fulfilling cycle developed as the Gulf States’ reluctance to increase their political and economic engagement with Iraq enabled Iran to take the lead in reconstruction and development projects (Hamada 2008). These included a new international airport at Najaf (opened in August 2008), the creation of a free trade zone around Basra, and the signing of multiple cooperation agreements between Iraq and Iran, covering issues as diverse as education, industry, environmental protection and insurance (Katzman 2008: 6).

Multiple issues remain unresolved as attention turns to the post-occupation dynamics of Iraqi reconstruction and re-entry into the regional fold. The long process of drawing down

coalition troops began with the signature of the US–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement in November 2008. This provided a timetable for the progressive withdrawal of all American forces from Iraq by 31 December 2011. For their part, British troops ended combat operations in southern Iraq and withdrew to Kuwait between May and July 2009 (*Independent* 2009). Nevertheless, significant questions remain to be settled over the future role of American and Iraqi armed forces in the post-2011 period. Uncertainty also extends to the regional implications of Iraq’s reinvolved in security frameworks in the Gulf and the future orientation of its military forces, and whether a future Iraqi leadership might seek to return to what they see as Iraq’s rightful position as a regional power (Thompson 2009: 28, 34). Particularly in Kuwait, policy-makers retain an understandable concern about Iraqi arms acquisitions, and insist that any weaponry supplied to the Iraqi military should be defensive rather than offensive in nature (*Gulf Times* 2008).

Thus, the regional dimension continues to present a number of material and ideational challenges binding Basra, southern Iraq and the Gulf States. The nature of this context has shifted over time as the dynamics of the war and occupation have given way to a post-conflict phase of reconstruction and regional re-engagement as GCC states re-established political and diplomatic ties with Iraq. This notwithstanding, several pressures generated by the conflict remain a potential threat to regional stability and security. Many of these are rooted in poor indices of human development and instances of human insecurity, such as the 2.3 million internally displaced people and high rates of poverty and unemployment. They will continue to act as agents of domestic instability within Iraq as long as they remain unresolved. A regional case in point is the global drugs trade and smuggling routes. Iraq emerged as an increasingly lucrative conduit under the conditions of weak state oversight and a porous border with Iran (International Narcotics Control Board 2007). Flows of opiates, cannabis and synthetic pharmaceuticals from Afghanistan via Iran and southern Iraq (via Al-Amarah) to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (via As-Samawah) for onward shipment to Europe enmeshed the GCC states in a regional shadow economy and reinforced their position as a central transit point for the illegal trafficking of narcotics (Leghari 2006: 43–4).

3. FUTURE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL FLASHPOINTS

The final section of this paper explores the range of challenges and potential flashpoints for future tensions between Iraq and its Gulf neighbourhood. These encompass several of the unresolved issues listed in previous sections as well as new pressures generated by the Arab Spring of 2011. These link existing issues in new ways and demonstrate the enduring potency

of the myriad socio-political, security and economic linkages and flows between Basra, southern Iraq and the Gulf.

3.1. Iraqi–Kuwaiti relations

The relationship between Kuwait and Iraq has veered from a wary embrace to a colder remembrance of past conflict, although Iraq's experience of occupation post-2003 appears to have engendered a degree of understanding of the horrors inflicted upon Kuwait in 1990 (Kukis 2011: 21). In Kuwait, the legacy of the Iraqi invasion and occupation in 1990–1 remains a raw issue and a defining watershed in its recent history. Many Kuwaitis maintain a palpable distrust of Iraq that often borders on anger. Issues such as Iraqi reparations and compensation for war damage are ones that Kuwaiti parliamentarians or public opinion cannot or will not compromise on. The anger this still generates in Kuwaiti discourse was evidenced in August 2008 when Kuwaiti MPs reacted with outrage to Iraqi calls for a write-off of tens of billions of dollars in debt and reparations, with one MP, Abdullatif Al-Ameeri, stating that 'The issue is a red line for Kuwait and no Kuwaiti will ever concede' it (*Kuwait Times* 2008).

For their part, many Iraqis feel resentful at the continuing demands for reparations for a crime committed under the now-defunct Saddam dictatorship. Already, Iraq has paid about US\$27.1 billion in reparations, but a further US\$20 billion is still owed. Yet, as David Roberts of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) Qatar has noted, Iraqis are nearly eleven times poorer per capita than Kuwaitis following three decades of conflict, sanctions and occupation, and question why they should be paying for the misdeeds of the former regime. Furthermore, Iraq cannot emerge from Chapter VII resolution at the United Nations until it resolves outstanding Gulf War issues with Kuwait. Just as Kuwaiti political dynamics encourage hard-line positions on the issue in Kuwait, so too Iraqi politicians see the issue as a fertile ground for staking their nationalist or populist credentials. Indeed, during 2010 Roberts detailed a steadily rising acrimony in bilateral relations. In April of that year, Kuwait Airways sought to impound an Iraqi airliner as it landed at London's Gatwick Airport, for the first time in twenty years. In December, Iraq's ambassador to the Arab League appeared to question the validity of the 1993 UN-demarcated boundary, while in January 2011 a Kuwaiti coastguard officer was killed in an altercation with an Iraqi fishing boat (Roberts 2011b).

Tensions then increased sharply in the summer of 2011. In early May, Kuwait began constructing a major new US\$1.1 billion deep-water container port (Mubarak Al-Kabir) on Bubiyan island. This mega-port had been mooted for some time and the creation of a 'world-

class, multi-modal logistics hub that can become a gateway to the north' was a recommendation of the *Vision Kuwait 2030* report prepared by Tony Blair Associates.⁷ Contracts for the port were tendered in 2009 and awarded in June 2010 to a joint venture between the South Korean Hyundai Engineering and Construction Company (*Gulf States Newsletter* 2011a). The commencement of its construction in March 2011 brought to a head the long-simmering issue of Iraq's access to Gulf waters and reinvigorated the lingering resentments (on both sides) listed above. Its geographical proximity to Iraq's only lines of access to open water (although within Kuwaiti territorial waters) was deemed provocative by Iraqi policy-makers, who expressed concern for their own efforts to build a major new deep-water port at Al-Faw. This had been intended to form a cornerstone of Iraq's economic recovery and featured a free trade zone designed to attract much-needed foreign direct investment (FDI) to southern Iraq, although it was hampered by domestic political and security complications well before the Mubarak Al-Kabir port became a flashpoint (*Gulf States Newsletter* 2011b).

Subsequent 'incidents' demonstrated how quickly tensions can rise in conditions where non-state spoilers retain a capacity to act and an atmosphere of mutual suspicion can rapidly degenerate. In July 2011, two Katyusha rockets fired into the Green Zone in Baghdad landed at or near the Kuwaiti Embassy and resulted in Kuwaiti accusations that the Embassy was deliberately targeted (*Kuwait Times* 2011a). Just days later, a Shiite militia group (Ketaeb Hezbollah), operating in southern Iraq with links to Iran's elite Al-Quds Force (Chulov 2011), released a statement warning Hyundai and its partners to halt work at the Mubarak Al-Kabir port, adding that 'The Iraqi people will not forget what the government of Kuwait is doing by building a port to strangle Iraq economically' (*Al Arabiya News* 2011). Notably, its leader, Basra-born Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, is the most senior Iraqi serving in the Al-Quds Force, having chosen to remain in Iran instead of returning to Iraq after 2003, and during the 1980s was a senior commander in the paramilitary Badr Corps. This consisted of exiled Iraqi Shiites in Iran who were used to spread the revolutionary message into Iraq and neighbouring states. Ominously for Kuwait, Al-Muhandis had been directly involved in terrorist operations against the Kuwaiti ruling family and the attacks on the US and French embassies in Kuwait in the early 1980s, and his reappearance conjured up vivid memories of that earlier period of trans-national instability (*Gulf States Newsletter* 2011c).

⁷ *Vision Kuwait 2030: Final Report*, p. 17.

The war of words increased further when an Iraqi MP, Oday Awwad (a member of the parliamentary energy committee), claimed that ‘Kuwait has been stealing Iraqi oil’ through slant drilling into the Rumaila oilfield. His inflammatory statement was reminiscent of Saddam Hussein’s similar accusation of slant drilling that formed part of the pretext for the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 (*Kuwait Times* 2011b). Although tensions subsequently eased somewhat, the core issues of Iraq’s access to Gulf waters and its longstanding desire to construct a major deep-water port remain unresolved. As these issues have consistently been areas of contention between Iraq and Kuwait, they remain susceptible to populist sentiments and impulsive actions by both sides, and are complicated on the Iraqi side by the presence of non-state actors and potential spoilers.

It thus remains to be seen (at the time of writing) where these tensions will lead, although the US military presence and leverage renders any Iraqi threat to Kuwait more rhetorical than existential. Its deeper significance lies in its capacity to keep bilateral relations trapped in a kind of post-Gulf War stasis, with neither side willing to make the compromises necessary to move forward. Yet economic connections have deepened in recent years with several Kuwaiti companies (such as the Zain mobile telecommunications company) and banks holding significant investments in Iraq, and heavy Kuwaiti investment in Iraqi Kurdistan (Roberts 2011b). Moreover, an intriguing new interdependency opened up in June 2011 when the Kuwait Energy Company (KEC) signed two 20-year gas development contracts with the Iraqi Ministry of Oil. These covered the Siba and Mansuriya fields (the former located in Basra province) and were awarded to KEC in partnership with the Turkish Petroleum Corporation in the Third Petroleum Licensing Round in October 2010. The CEO of KEC, Sara Akbar, expressed the belief that it marked ‘a step forward in Kuwaiti–Iraqi relations’, as Kuwait’s participation in developing Iraq’s hydrocarbons resources would be utilized to generate power in Baghdad and Basra (Kuwait Energy Company 2011).

Ties between Kuwait and Iraq therefore retain an air of vulnerability about them. This uncertainty may increase as Iraqi politics moves decisively into a post-sectarian phase and the issue provides a platform for populist or nationalist mobilization. In this atmosphere, what are regarded as Kuwaiti ‘provocations’ may fuel a narrative of Iraqi grievance that is already being expressed within Iraq. The proliferation of economic linkages and even longer-term energy interdependencies offers an encouraging sign that relations can be marked by cooperation rather than conflict. Yet in the current climate, they appear hostages to fortune, and to the rhetorical and emotional appeal to past and present grievances that provide fodder for grandstanding to domestic constituents.

3.2. *Shiite empowerment and Bahraini repression*

Trans-national pressures of a different sort emerged during the rise of a large-scale pro-democracy movement in Bahrain in February 2011 and its subsequent crushing by the ruling Al-Khalifa family, with Saudi-led GCC ‘assistance’. A cross-sectarian social movement began demonstrating in February 2011 for meaningful political reform and an end to discriminatory policies. Its wide initial appeal to Bahrainis of all classes and backgrounds briefly threatened to topple the regime in the tumultuous aftermath of the ousting of unpopular leaders in Tunisia and Egypt. However, the Al-Khalifa responded with brute force by mercilessly cracking down on every facet of oppositional activity (Coates Ulrichsen 2011c). On 14 March, the Saudi Arabian National Guard led a supposedly pan-GCC ‘Peninsula Shield Force’ into Bahrain ostensibly to protect key installations and national infrastructure. Nevertheless, the move was interpreted by many analysts as indicating the ‘true colours’ of the GCC as a club of monarchs who would never allow one of their number to fall (cf. Ayoob 2011). In the months which followed, instances of sectarianism perpetrated by the ruling Sunni elite against Shiite interests in Bahrain multiplied, including the destruction of mosques and other religious symbols (Cockburn 2011).

Interestingly, given the protestations by the Bahraini government (and its international supporters) that the unrest was being stirred by malign Iranian influences, the crackdown caused more outrage among Shiites in Iraq rather than Iran. Iraqi parliamentarians – Sunni and Christian as well as Shiite – condemned the GCC ‘interference’ in Bahrain while the Shiite political parties vocally expressed their solidarity with the opposition movement (Visser 2011). This somewhat counter-intuitive development reflected the complexity of the trans-national institutional connections that link Shiite communities across national boundaries.⁸ The existence of more than one *marja’ al-taqlid* (source of emulation) means that no monolithic pan-Shiite unity existed. Instead, sources of authority were stretched across *maraji* such as Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf and Ayatollah Fadlallah (until his death in 2010) in Lebanon, as well as Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran. Among Bahrain’s diverse Shiite communities, many adhered to clerical networks based in the Iraqi holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, or to Fadlallah in Lebanon (who broke with Khomeini’s concept of *velayet-e-faqih* or rule of the jurisprudence) (Toensing 2007: 47). This fragmented the politics of influence, especially as hitherto very pro-Iranian networks such as Shiraziyyin evolved into domestic political actors after the 1980s (Louer 2008: 239–343). Consequently, to the extent that directional trans-

⁸ Although significant outrage among Iranians at the treatment of Bahraini protestors also occurred, it was not at the parliamentary level. Indeed, one can only imagine the Bahraini (and GCC) reaction had it been so.

national sympathies and ideational ties existed, many pointed towards Iraq, even while Bahraini regime loyalists claimed to see an Iranian hand in the rising.

The foregoing is not intended to suggest that Iraqi (or Iranian) pan-Shiite groups had a role in the uprising against monarchical misrule in Bahrain. Rather, it highlights the ongoing significance of the Iraqi holy shrine cities as centres of trans-national religious networks. This must be viewed within the specific context of the Arab Spring and the resulting increase in sectarianism in the Gulf. This occurred as beleaguered regimes sought to externalize socio-economic and political pressures by ascribing them to Iranian manipulation. Although the sectarian rhetoric emanating from GCC foreign ministries (in particular) was directed against Iran (with Bahrain's Foreign Minister Khalid Al-Khalifa going so far as to say 'We have never seen such a sustained campaign from Iran on Bahrain and the Gulf'; Coates Ulrichsen 2011d), its sharp escalation bodes ill for the full normalization of relations between the GCC states and an inevitably Shiite-dominated Iraqi polity. Here, the generally poor atmosphere of mistrust between Gulf leaders and their post-Saddam counterparts could worsen if the former perceive Iraq to be widely penetrated by Iranian influence at state and non-state levels.

3.3. Concluding observations

Many of the regional connections examined in this paper have been generated by interactions between states interwoven with supra- and sub-state trans-national flows. As the opening section made clear, political, familial and commercial ties have long linked the region together, although their nature changed with time. The subsequent sections described how the three major inter-state conflicts in the Gulf since 1980 featured a mixture of these different dimensions of cross-border interaction. These still relatively young nation-states containing multiple internal fault-lines or potential fractures have demonstrated their vulnerability to the dynamic interplay between domestic actors and regional and international events. In this contemporary era of aggressively (and largely unregulated) globalizing processes and flows of people, information and ideas, this interaction is expected to accelerate. The outbreak and contagious cross-border appeal of the Arab Spring are in many ways a logical outcome of the rise of a generation of educated but frustrated youth across the Arab world wired together as never before.

The intense pressures generated by the Arab Spring have already started to reshape the domestic political arena in affected states. No longer can the demands of a politicized citizenry be suppressed into existence without jeopardizing regime legitimacy and its very survival. The scale of the pre-emptive 'handouts' and welfare entitlements announced in GCC states may

have averted major instability in the short-term (Bahrain excepted) but is hardly sustainable in the medium- and longer-term. Faced with a newly-empowered society well aware of alternative pathways of organization and development and able to bypass state controls on communication and public mobilization, regimes across the Arab world face a period of reformulation and restructuring of domestic political structures to bring them up to the challenge of competing in twenty-first century global markets.⁹

Domestic considerations are therefore likely to take centre-stage for some time to come. On the surface, this might appear a positive change from the regional and cross-border instability witnessed in the Gulf over the past three decades. However, the prioritization of internal pressures in Iraq and the GCC states may supersede the moves to reincorporate Iraq into its regional hinterland. GCC states' economic and financial leverage could have made a distinct contribution to the processes of post-conflict reconstruction and recovery in Iraq, and indeed were starting slowly to do so. Greater levels of engagement and the creation and thickening of economic interdependencies would, in turn, have strengthened the political and diplomatic reconnections that began in 2008. In addition, enhanced engagement could also have counteracted Gulf States' concerns about the degree of Iranian involvement in, or influence over, Iraq, and prevented their initial reluctance to engage with Iraq from morphing into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By contrast, political and security trajectories in the post-Arab Spring Gulf point in a different direction. Increasing sectarian rhetoric at regime level intermixed with a tendency to attribute any domestic unrest to the work of external actors has produced new forms of intra-regional tensions. Meanwhile, the legacy of previous conflict and the challenge of managing the connections between Iraq and its neighbours remain open and largely unresolved, particularly with Kuwait. These issues retain the ability to complicate and sour relations and may be activated or exacerbated during times of tension for domestic political purposes. They illustrate the enduring difficulty of managing relationships in this volatile yet highly connected regional landscape.

⁹ Iraq has, perhaps surprisingly in view of its poor socio-economic indicators of human development, escaped the worst of the unrest coursing through the Arab world. However, the deadly riots that broke out in Nasiriyah and Basra in June 2010 in protest at persistent power outages demonstrated the government's vulnerability to rising public anger at its failure to substantially improve public services.

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