



Global Insider: Iraq-GCC Relations

By The Editors | 28 Apr 2011

Under pressure from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League [has indefinitely postponed a planned summit meeting in Baghdad](#). In an email interview, [Sean Foley](#), a Fulbright scholar at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization in Kuala Lumpur and author of "[The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam](#)," discussed Iraq-GCC relations.

WPR: What has been the state of relations between post-Saddam Iraq and the GCC?

Sean Foley: While both Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are energy-producing states allied with Washington, they have poor diplomatic relations. Shiite Arabs dominate Iraq and have close ties with Shiite Iran, while Arab monarchies hostile to Iran dominate the GCC states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Baghdad and GCC capitals also accuse each other of seeking to influence each other's internal affairs. Saudi Arabia has supported Iraq's Sunni Arabs opposed to Baghdad, and Saudis and other Gulf nationals stand accused of promoting religious extremism and terrorism in Iraq. At the same time, Gulf leaders fear the influence of Iraq's foremost religious figure, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Many Shiites in the GCC states look to al-Sistani for guidance in spiritual and worldly affairs. Further poisoning relations is the residual distrust dating back to Iraq's 1990s invasion of Kuwait and GCC support for Iraqi governments that repressed Shiite Arabs.

WPR: What is driving the current tensions, as reflected in the GCC's proposal to cancel the Arab League Summit in Baghdad?

Foley: The driving force in the current tensions is the GCC response to the massive demonstrations in Bahrain. There, Shiite Arabs called for political and socio-economic rights commensurate with their status as Bahrain's largest religious group. When the Shiites in Saudi Arabia's oil-producing Eastern Province also demanded more rights, Saudi and other GCC leaders concluded that the demonstrations in Bahrain had to be crushed before Iran could gain a foothold in the GCC. In March, GCC military forces entered Bahrain, crushed the demonstrations and leveled the center of the protests, Manama's Pearl Square. GCC leaders also warned Iran not to meddle in Bahrain.

Iraqis and other Shiites worldwide reacted angrily to the intervention. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warned that the intervention could ignite a sectarian war. Al-Sistani ordered a day of prayer to demonstrate solidarity with the Bahraini people and voiced disgust with the violence there. His words carry enormous weight: He rarely comments on political issues and has poor relations with Tehran.

In response, GCC diplomats convinced the Arab League to cancel its May 8 meeting in Baghdad indefinitely. The meeting had already been postponed in March due to the protest movements in a number of Arab states. The meeting

would have been the first of its kind in the Iraqi capital for decades, and Iraqi officials viewed it as a critical milestone in its global re-emergence.

WPR: What are the future prospects for Iraq-GCC political and economic ties?

Foley: GCC-Iraqi political relations are certain to be strained for some time to come, and it is unlikely that their economic ties will be much better. Although GCC-Iraq trade grew from roughly \$31 million in 1999 to nearly \$6.5 billion in 2008, more than 80 percent of the trade was Iraqi exports to the UAE. Iraq has no trade with Kuwait and imports virtually nothing from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.