

Downwind from Iran

 [washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/downwind-from-iran](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/downwind-from-iran)

Peter Berkowitz

April 6, 2009

Kuwait City

According to the conventional wisdom--echoed by Senators Obama and Clinton on the campaign trail and by President Obama in his *Al Arabiya* interview a week after taking office--the Bush administration's conduct of foreign policy fostered anti-Americanism around the globe and left America's alliances, particularly in the Arab world, in disrepair. While they are perfectly familiar with this view, the people I spoke with last week in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait--government officials, military officers, business people, and journalists--offered a less melodramatic and more compelling account.

Not that the weeklong trip to the Gulf--funded by the UAE and Kuwait and organized by Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies for a small group of scholars, journalists, and former and future government officials--failed to include plenty of criticism of the Bush administration, particularly in connection with Israel, Iraq, and Iran. But even the harshest critics stressed their countries' close and continuing military and economic cooperation with the United States. They also insisted that America's vital national interests aligned with theirs and were keen to cultivate the alliance on the grounds that it was vital to the long-term security and prosperity of the Gulf states and the United States.

The UAE's and Kuwait's common orientation toward the United States stems from common geo-political circumstances. They both live in a dangerous neighborhood that, because it contains 56 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, is essential to the international economic order. The vast majority of citizens of both Kuwait and the UAE--which is composed of seven emirates, the most prominent being Abu Dhabi, the capital, and Dubai, the bustling international port--are Arab and Sunni Muslim. Both the UAE and Kuwait are harbor countries with their backs to the desert and their faces toward the sea, which means that both have seafaring and trading histories and a tradition of openness to the outside world. Both are tiny and are home to large numbers of non-nationals: The UAE has about 900,000 citizens and 3.9 million expatriates, and Kuwait has about 1.4 million citizens and 1.3 million expatriates.

Both enjoy enormous oil wealth. Kuwait owns 8 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and the UAE 7 percent. Kuwait's reserves of 104 billion barrels are the sixth largest in the world; the UAE's 98 billion barrels the seventh largest. Because of their remarkably small number of citizens--Kuwait has fewer than Phoenix and the UAE fewer than San José--they lead the world in oil per citizen: The UAE boasts about 108,000 barrels, and Kuwait more than 75,000 barrels, in proven reserves per citizen. By comparison, Saudi Arabia, despite

possessing 267 billion barrels in proven oil reserves, by far the largest supply in the world, comes in a distant third: For each of its 22 million citizens, Saudi Arabia owns less than 12,000 barrels.

And, not least, the UAE and Kuwait both confront Iran across the Gulf, less than a hundred miles away: a Persian, Shiite, theocratic power whose population of 66 million is greater than that of Iraq and the six Gulf Cooperation Council members (the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Saudi Arabia) put together. Both the UAE and Kuwait are tied to Iran by long-standing commercial interests--400,000 Iranians live and work in Dubai, and, in Kuwait, Iranian commercial vessels dock in the same port as U.S. Navy ships. And both view Iran as a destabilizing expansionist power seeking regional hegemony in the Gulf, preeminence in the greater Middle East, and leadership in the worldwide Islamic revolution.

Notwithstanding their shared circumstances, the UAE and Kuwait have opened themselves to the outside world in different ways. Dubai, the UAE's famous city-state, is, as one official put it, "a melting pot on steroids": In just a few decades the sheikhdom transformed itself from a sleepy seaside village into the world's seventh busiest container seaport, the gateway to the Gulf, and a glistening commercial hub; only a few hours' flight from India, northeast Africa, and southeast Europe, it is a center for banking, real estate, and tourism. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi, the more staid capital of the UAE and home to almost all of its oil, is building a city devoted to world culture just off its coast on 10-square-mile Saadiyat Island. The island will feature a branch of the Louvre, a new Guggenheim designed by Frank Gehry, a spectacular performing arts center, and a full service New York University campus intended to be a center of higher education in the Middle East.

While Kuwait's elite--political, commercial, intellectual--is, like that of the UAE, typically educated in the West and comfortable with Western ways, Kuwaitis concentrate more on conserving their traditional culture. Kuwait has not sought to become an international tourist destination, and only lifted its ban on direct foreign investment five years ago. The liberalizing forces in Kuwait, moreover, face significant internal opposition. The parliament, which the emir dissolved on March 18 because of a dispute over the extent of representatives' oversight of cabinet ministers, will, after the coming mid-May elections, almost certainly still contain a substantial Islamist and tribal bloc.

Much as the UAE and Kuwait have been rocked by the global economic crisis, security questions remain a paramount concern. In discussing them, Emiratis and Kuwaitis often begin by criticizing what they perceive to be the United States' one-sided support for Israel, deploring the return to power of Benjamin Netanyahu, and urging the Obama administration to compel Israel to cease settlements in the West Bank and make whatever other concessions are necessary to achieve a peace agreement that promptly brings into existence a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

But even when these criticisms are heartfelt, they quickly give way to the more urgent question of Iraq. Many in the region believe the U.S. invasion was a mistake the Bush administration could have avoided had it consulted its Gulf state allies. Although they would be delighted by the emergence of a stable and enlightened Iraq, most observers in both the UAE and Kuwait are convinced that the new Iraq is inherently unstable, even if it is now enjoying a lull before the next violent storm. Their biggest regret about Iraq, however, has to do with Iran, the primordial issue to which all discussions of national security in the Arabian Peninsula eventually return.

The dominant view in the UAE and Kuwait is that by toppling Saddam Hussein, who had served as a check on Iran, and building a Shiite-led government in Baghdad that accepts Iranian influence in Iraq, the United States played a decisive role in unleashing an Iranian superpower. Although our interlocutors were difficult to pin down on how they would prefer the United States deal with Iran, they made plain their concern that no agreement be reached with Tehran at their expense.

Kuwaitis emphasized that Iran's export of jihad and its program to develop nuclear weapons were hardly the only threats it presented. Kuwaitis worry that even if Iran's nuclear reactor at Bushehr, 133 nautical miles across the Gulf on the coast, were intended for strictly civilian purposes, it would still pose a grave threat. Given the Russian--and worse still in Kuwaiti eyes, Iranian--engineers at work there and the direction of Gulf winds, they fear the toxic fallout of a second Chernobyl. And then there are the thousands of Shahab-1, -2, and -3 missiles in Iran's arsenal, which can reach Kuwaiti civilian populations, oil fields, and refineries in minutes.

If one message came through loud and clear during five days of conversations, it was that contrary to the conventional wisdom, and despite the importance of a just and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, Iran is far and away the major threat to peace and stability in the Middle East. If the president thinks that the United States has economic woes now, they will be as nothing if he lets down our pro-Western Gulf allies and thwarts our own vital national interests by failing to employ the necessary mixture of diplomacy and force to persuade or compel Iran to respect the requirements of international order.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.