On the morning of Sunday, December 18, 2011, the last 500 American troops crossed the border into Kuwait after the bulk of the 150,000-strong US force had completed its withdrawal. There was neither jubilation nor rousing welcomes. Just the gloomy and depressing sight of moving military vehicles.

“...We have given them [the Iraqis] the opportunity to be able to succeed and become sovereign and independent at the cost of many lives,” said US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta before flying to Baghdad.”

According to official data (which are far from complete), the US-led invasion in March 2003 and the full-scale war (in which all types of weapons were employed) resulted in the deaths of 4500 Americans and more than 100,000 Iraqis; and that figure does not even come close to the number of people who were wounded, mutilated and crippled. Panetta saw no need to say that the military campaign cost $1 trillion. However, everybody knows that.

The last official ceremonies marking the withdrawal from Iraq had not ended before commentators in the major newspapers and on television had begun vying with each other to offer their analyses of the war that had lasted nearly 9 years. One commentator summed up the views of several experts with bitter irony, calling it a “catastrophic success.” I have to agree with that conclusion; the facts support it. The loudly proclaimed gift of freedom and democracy that American soldiers gave the Iraqi people caused (in addition to the enormous loss of life) a complete breakdown in the once well-oiled mechanism of government, economic and social structures under Saddam
Hussein’s despotic regime. The country has been destroyed, and key sectors of the economy, communications, social services, education and health care have been crippled. More than 3 million Iraqis have been forced to leave the country. In the chaos, “executioners” streamed in, particularly the notorious al-Qaeda and other extremist organizations that the “tyrant” Saddam had not even let approach the border. Iraq has now become a breeding ground and training camp for terrorists of all stripes.

Conflicts previously suppressed by the government erupted in the conditions of extreme poverty, rampant crime and corruption: secular conflicts (between Muslims and Christians, Sunnis and Shiites, conflicts among members of smaller religious groups) and ethnic conflicts, primarily between Kurds and Arabs—not to mention social conflicts. The country was left devastated, humiliated, impoverished and on the verge of collapse and disintegration as a result of the operation to “rescue” Iraq from a dictator and the world community from the possible use of nuclear weapons by Iraq (which were never found).

Forecasts differ, but experts agree about one thing. A major strategic result of the tragedy suffered by the Iraqi people is that Iran has secured its position as the leading power in the Persian Gulf. The country that once was its chief competitor has been crushed and drained of blood (Iraq had the Gulf’s largest and most combat capable army and an efficient mechanism for mobilizing its masses). What was it? A Machiavellian but incomprehensible and unsophisticated plot, a strategic miscalculation, foresight or inexorable logic, a disregard for reality or a belief in superiority and egotism? How does this relate to the West’s fierce campaign in recent months against Tehran, which includes threats and propaganda attacks, sanctions, freezing of assets, etc., that they claim is punishment for Iran’s program to manufacture nuclear weapons?

However, it is one thing to increase political and diplomatic tensions (for example, between London and Tehran), and quite another to feel that a nearby traditional enemy is gaining strength in the struggle for the right to have the final word in the Gulf. Now, after being in existence for 30 years, the countries of the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf (or Gulf Cooperation Council—GCC for short) felt more vulnerable than ever before and sensed that the Arab revolutions of the spring will be followed by a “winter of discontent.”

The GCC established by the six Gulf monarchies, which until recently were sleeping relatively quietly, woke up to the roar of earthquakes that have been shaking all of North Africa and the Middle East for a year (what a strange coincidence: it was last year on December 18, the date of the US withdrawal from Iraq, that a spark from the fire that burned Bouazizi, a vendor from the Tunisian village of Sidi Bouzidi who sold fruit from a cart, ignited first the Tunisian and then the pan-Arab revolutions).

If we were to take perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Gulf monarchies’ overall plan of action, it would be the feverish and somewhat chaotic steps to expand the GCC. Traditionally, the conservative members of the GCC have been very reluctant to accept new members into their club. Iraq would seem to be a logical candidate for membership in some format, even though it is a republic; but that was out of the question during Saddam Hussein’s time, especially after Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait, where the occupation is still considered a national disgrace. Yemen has been expressing a stubborn desire to become a member of the GCC since 1996, but the issue has always been postponed: Yemen is poor and ailing, a republic to boot, and unpredictable, with nothing but problems, even though it is right on the Gulf and all of the countries on the Arabian Peninsula have large Yemeni communities—there are more than 1 million Yemenis in Saudi Arabia alone. At the 2001 GCC summit in Masqat, the Council’s leaders finally agreed to accept Yemen on some of its committees that are responsible for expanding cooperation in the fields of health, employment and education.

But that was before. Now the GCC’s feels the need for support—structural, demographic, and even military—even though all of the Gulf States are saturated with modern weapons from the United States, Britain, France and other Western countries. So an initiative was begun to bring Jordan, Morocco and, more recently, Egypt into the GCC. Everyone of course understands that Jordan is located some distance away from the Gulf, and Morocco is on the coast of an entirely different ocean. By way of explanation, it was argued rather awkwardly that it is in the spirit of the times—a new political structure of fraternal monarchies. And no worries—the Gulf is a virtual concept, after all. Egypt is no problem because the Red Sea basin and the Persian Gulf are communicating bodies of water, a common sea route.

To outsiders, the case is clear: the Gulf countries perceived extreme danger and attempted to assemble a military-political bloc against Iran. Lacking confidence in its own strength, the GCC could transform itself by gaining the support of demographically burdened Egypt, which swings considerable political weight, and Jordan and Morocco, which, although small, have highly capable and well-trained militaries. That would give them a more reliable and
much-needed “shield,” something the rulers in the Gulf are always seeking, especially now that they are so anxiously and even fearfully feeling the breath of the Arab revolutions. But the Gulf countries are even more afraid of the Shiite gale blowing from Iran that is stirring up their own religious minorities, and they know very well what Shiite fanaticism is like in the region. It appears that the clock in this sultry region floating on underground lakes of oil is slowly advancing.

People in Jordan and Morocco are less excited about these ideas. They understand the artificiality and true purpose of such an alliance and say they will study the issue for a couple of years. In addition, one idea always stands out—that although all of these countries are monarchies, by their inner nature, current condition and outlook on the world each is different, and the similarities among them are largely academic. The overwhelming majority of the population (or more precisely, in Jordan a significant part of the population) in those two countries is Islamic, but their governments are generally secular, as is the case in Egypt, where the reaction to the GCC’s plans is especially cautious. Egyptians in the Arab and Western media see it as a premature and ill-conceived initiative: “We have entirely different goals and different enemies. For us Egyptians the main enemy is Israel and the American Zionist organizations that assist it. And the main task for Egypt right now is stabilization, establishment of order and economic recovery, not jumping into ill-conceived undertakings. Although they say it can benefit us economically, it is easier to work through existing channels, with bilateral agreements, by having Gulf countries increase their investments in industrial projects.”

Reactions in the Arab press to GCC activities in this area have been mixed. They generally understand the traditional concern about Iran’s growing ambitions. But that gives rise to a question—are the Gulf countries intent on forming a bloc in place of or in opposition to the League of Arab States? Would that not be a blow to Arab unity and solidarity? The representatives of the Gulf countries respond to those comments by saying something like this: Considering the new challenges and the changing balance of power in the region, the GCC should be seen less as a territorial bloc and more as a strategic alliance. Qatar has been especially active in these matters: The rulers of that tiny state command both enormous financial leverage, thanks to having world’s largest natural gas reserves, and a powerful tool for influencing the Arab and now the international community—Al Jazeera, which, with its modern equipment and highly skilled staff, is able to quickly collect information on events in the region, filter it, package it and present it to consumers in the form and format that its sponsors deem necessary.

After the US withdrawal from Iraq, the debate about the region’s future is becoming more acute and pressing; new political configurations are on the horizon. They should become apparent soon. It is simply that the clock of history runs slowly in the desert heat. As they say: “To be continued.”

A recent (mid-December) remark by Britain’s Defense Minister was remarkable in that regard. He said the UK intends to keep its military bases in Cyprus at Dhekelia and Episkopi (254 sq. km—3% of the island’s territory) operational, contrary to repeatedly confirmed earlier reports that the British were willing to give them half if the Cyprus problem is settled. The Minister stressed that, as shown by recent events, they are in a region of geopolitical importance and high priority for the UK’s long-term national security interests in the Middle East.

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