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The United States and the Gulf States: Uncertain Partners in a Changing Region

Two important issues are testing relations between the United States and its allies in the Gulf: democratic transitions in the Arab world and regional security. Their outcome will either strengthen or disrupt what has been a long-term partnership. The United States and its Gulf allies are well into their second year of reacting to, and attempting to influence, the rapid political change in the Middle East and North Africa, but their efforts are informed by differing motivations. Meanwhile the looming threat of Iran attaining nuclear weapons has brought greater urgency to efforts to enhance Gulf security, but also some disquiet in the Gulf about any possible US deal with Iran that would serve global non-proliferation interests but threaten their vital regional security interests.

Given that the process of change in the region is likely to be prolonged and difficult, the following questions merit continuing review:

- How do the United States and the Gulf state governments perceive what is happening in the Arab states undergoing profound change: Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and particularly (because of its scale and importance) Egypt? How do our differing views of the situation influence our willingness to support democratic change and economic stability in the transitioning countries?
- How do the United States and Gulf countries perceive the security environment in the region, and how can cooperation be improved to protect long-term security interests?
- Are there sufficient common denominators to sustain the partnership between the Gulf states and the United States? Will they be able to build on areas of agreement

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The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East studies political transitions and economic conditions in Arab countries and recommends US and European policies to encourage constructive change.

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and manage areas of difference to effectively address security, economic, and political challenges and to avoid unproductive competition for influence?

The Trust Deficit Between Gulf Partners and the United States

The United States and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) share vital interests. In addition to core mutual defense needs, the Gulf is a major market for US exporters and remains an important source of petroleum. Yet the shared political, security, and commercial interests of the Gulf states and the United States have not translated into the deep mutual trust that form the basis of long-term alliances. Such trust is undercut by a US perspective dominated by ill-informed views of the Gulf states, often failing to distinguish one from another, worrying primarily about the export of Islamic extremism and terrorism from the Gulf region, and critical of non-representative governance structures and treatment of women and minorities within their borders.

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Many interlocutors in the Gulf see the United States as a necessary but unpredictable and unreliable partner. Gulf leaders believe that the United States has failed to deliver on the central issue of peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis, view the Iraq war as a disaster for their interests, and chafe at constantly being asked to be the ATM for projects devised in Western capitals. They were stunned by the abrupt manner in which the United States appeared to abandon former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a long-time ally, and some are convinced that the United States is deeply naive about the intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood. These differences do not preclude deep military and intelligence cooperation, but the trust deficit is not far below the surface and has been most evident in differences between the US and Gulf reaction to the systemic changes in Egypt, and to a lesser extent in Tunisia and Libya. The undercurrent of distrust is not simply an elite phenomenon: a 2011 poll found that 71 percent of Saudi respondents and 87 percent of Emiratis surveyed disagreed with the assertion that “the United States contributes to peace and stability in the Arab world.”¹

Democratic Transitions: Opportunity or Threat?

The United States and its Gulf allies are still adjusting to continually evolving Arab transitions. Predictability and stability were the hallmarks of the regimes of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Mubarak. External actors, so accustomed to the stagnation of the political system in Egypt, for example, now have difficulty processing the rate of change. The United States has taken what it considers a practical approach to the political developments based on the view that the previous regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya failed to respond to demands for economic opportunity, freedom, individual dignity, and inclusive prosperity. At the Manama Dialogue in December 2012, US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns called for “continued support for political openness, democratic reforms, and successful post-revolutionary transitions,” with long-term stability and security depending upon full participation by all citizens in the political and economic life of their countries. He also noted that successful political transition and democratic reform require “a sense of economic possibility.”

The focus of US actions is assistance to spur economic growth on the premise that the situation will stabilize and improve only when the economic aspirations of the huge youth populations in the transition countries are met. This has translated into US decisions to deemphasize stark differences with the philosophy and policies of the Muslim Brothers, for example, and to work with the elected bodies and governments, which presumably will be judged by future elections. When revolutions turn bloody, the policy is more situational; contrast the robust NATO support for the Libyan revolt with the meager support for the Syrian resistance.

Many in the Gulf states do not share the United States’ qualified equanimity for the rapid change that has occurred, and in particular, the sudden growth in the power and influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Speaking with the author, one Saudi academic labeled the changes a “triumph of liberalism without liberals,” and many in the Gulf view the instability in the transition states as directly under-cutting their own stability. Elites in some Gulf countries view the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat; this is particularly the case in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where dozens of members of a Brotherhood affiliate, al-Islah, have been arrested. UAE officials portray virtually any kind of Islamist organizing as a danger not only to itself but also to other Gulf states, for example, stating that protests in Kuwait indicated a “coordinated plot spurred by the Arab Spring events.”² An Emirati academic recently provided a pointed critique of Washington’s naiveté, labeling US policy toward the Brotherhood “pathetically opportunistic.”³ Evoking the legendary Egyptian singer, another UAE analyst called the Egyptian Brotherhood the “new Umm Kulthum, who will sing the song of Islamism to the whole region.” Saudi and Kuwaiti leadership, although not so vocal, strongly share the view that the Brotherhood is not to be trusted. The outlier is Qatar, whose leadership has long cultivated ties with a broad range of Islamists including those affiliated with the Brotherhood and Hamas. For Qatar, the ascent of Islamists to political power in the region through elections represents a new opportunity for the small Gulf state to exert influence through its financial and ideological support.

Some Gulf states have also supported Salafi groups in the transitioning countries through both official and unofficial channels. Such support for Salafists is, in part, motivated by a

1 John Zogby and Zogby International, *Arab Attitudes*, 2011, (Washington, DC: Arab American Institute Foundation), p. 4.

2 The Khaleej Times, “UAE slams foreign designs on GCC,” http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/nationgeneral/2012/October/nationgeneral_October479.xml§ion=nationgeneral.

3 Gulf News, “US, Islamists and Arab Gulf States,” <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/us-islamists-and-arab-gulf-states-1.1110379>.

desire to mitigate the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴ Salafist groups such as the Nusra Front in Syria (which the United States designated a terrorist organization in December 2012) and Ansar al Sharia in Libya have almost certainly benefited from Gulf help. At the time of the Egyptian presidential election it was widely believed (but not confirmed) that Salafi parties, which won one-quarter of parliamentary seats despite their lack of prior political experience, would not have seen such success had they not been able to spread largesse in poor communities with substantial Qatari and/or Saudi support. The attacks on US personnel and facilities in Libya and Tunisia are believed to have been the work of violent Salafist elements, bringing into stark relief US and Gulf differences over support for such groups.

The Gulf states' largely defensive approach to democratic change was also evident in the dispatch of security forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to Bahrain to protect the Sunni Al-Khalifa family in the face of widespread unrest among the majority Shia population in 2011. The Saudis were determined to prevent spillover into their own Shia-populated Eastern Province. The Bahraini ruling family and their patrons in Riyadh accused Iran of stirring the pot, labeling Bahraini protestors as Iranian agents—a version of events that, however poorly backed by facts, is often repeated in the Gulf. The United States accepts that Iran is trying to influence events in Bahrain, but gives far more weight to domestic factors in assessing the causes of the internal conflict.

Democracy Not for Us

Where the United States and European allies see the Arab transitions as generally positive change that must be nurtured, the Gulf states see threats. This clash of views on the merits of the Arab awakening influences the level of enthusiasm to help the new democracies succeed and shapes the motivations to provide material support to governments and their political rivals.

Leaders in the Gulf believe that multi-party democracy is incompatible with the survival of their monarchies. Although the leadership in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman do not expend much effort explaining their political vision, the UAE and Qatar have embarked on national branding campaigns that have thrust them onto the world stage, embracing globalization and modernity while rejecting most forms of

political expression and participation as inconsistent, and even unnecessary, for their societies. One Qatari analyst suggested to the author that the UAE and Qatar have leap-frogged democracy to reach a new model of good governance that better responds to their citizens' needs and demands.

Bubbling under the surface in the Gulf, however, is a nagging and growing uncertainty about the relevance and durability of modern monarchies. Royal families see a threat in young people who employ social media to mobilize protests and establish a new channel of political expression that pays little heed to the Gulf's traditions of limited and hierarchical political discourse. Yet one Gulf businessman admitted privately that despite efforts by some Gulf states to curtail the role of social media, there is no effective immunization against the broad trend of greater political engagement and participation.

Hurry Up Versus Wait and See

The international community has thus far provided modest levels of economic support to the Arab countries in transition. The amounts pledged fall far short of the generous support for the emergence of democracy in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. US and European leaders assert that economic aspirations, especially those of the young and unemployed, need to be addressed quickly or less palatable political alternatives will emerge to replace the fledgling democracies, or worse, they could become failed states.

Gulf donors have promised significant sums and helped stabilize the Egyptian pound by making loans to the Egyptian Central Bank, but they are motivated not by an interest in supporting young democracies but rather by their own political and economic interests. To this end, they have adopted a "wait and see" attitude toward the new leaders in Egypt and Tunisia before committing significant additional funds, for example, and seem not to sense any urgency in making such decisions. Saudi Arabia has made pledges as part of the Deauville Partnership established by the G-8 and supported the recently-established Transition Fund,⁵ but in general the Gulf states have been unenthusiastic about multilateral efforts. An Emirati businessman commented off-the-record that the Gulf contributors want to ensure they receive "credit" for support they provide, and the multilateral initiatives seem to diffuse such recognition.

⁴ See Project on Middle East Political Science, *Arab Uprisings: The New Salafi Politics*, October 16, 2012 for several papers on current Salafi movements.

⁵ See Atlantic Council Report "Arab Awakening: Are the US and EU Missing the Challenge?" by Danya Greenfield and Rosa Balfour, June 2012, for more details on the Deauville Partnership and the problems of mobilizing foreign assistance.

Official Aid and Loans from Gulf Countries to Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (as of January 2013)

Egypt	
Kuwait	<p>PLEGGED: Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development loan portfolio in Egypt is \$1.6 billion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – \$820 million loan to finance Benha power station, December 2012. – \$102 million loan to finance Helwan power station project. Received first \$60 million, September 2012. – \$88 million loan to finance construction of 750 megawatt power plant north of Cairo, May 2012. – \$60 million loan to assist with gas network, July 2012. Awaiting Egyptian approval. – \$2.2 million in technical assistance for railway-related projects, May 2012.
Qatar	<p>RECEIVED: \$2 billion deposited in central bank and granted \$500 million, December 2012.</p> <p>PLEGGED: \$2.5 billion (in addition to the \$2.5 billion already received), January 2013.</p> <p>PLEGGED: \$18 billion in investment over the next 5 years, September 2012.</p>
Saudi Arabia	<p>PLEGGED: \$4 billion, May 2011.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – \$1.5 billion (deposited) to support central bank reserves, June 2012. – \$500 million for development projects, May 2012. – \$250 million to finance purchases of petroleum products, June 2012. – \$200 million support for SMEs, June 2012. – \$750 million line of credit for Treasury bill purchase, May 2011. <p>TRANSFERRED: 48,000 tons of liquefied gas, February 2012.</p> <p>TRANSFERRED: \$550,000 to World Food Program for food aid and education, June 2012.</p> <p>PLEGGED: Saudi Development Fund pledged \$1.5 billion to Egyptian government, November 2012.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – \$230 million loan to finance three development projects as part of \$500 million package, December 2012. – \$500 million for Treasury bill purchase, May 2012.
UAE	<p>PLEGGED: \$3 billion, June 2011.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – \$1.5 billion support for SMEs. – \$750 million for infrastructure/housing projects. – \$750 million in soft loans. <p>PLEGGED: \$42 million to Cairo’s Al Azhar University to fund development projects, July 2012.</p>
Libya	
Kuwait	<p>TRANSFERRED: \$180 million to National Transitional Council, April 2012.</p>
Qatar	<p>PLEGGED: \$400-500 million to National Transitional Council, May 2012.</p> <p>National Transitional Council head Mustafa Abdul Jalil said Qatar spent more than \$2 billion on the Libyan revolution, August 2012.</p>
Tunisia	
Qatar	<p>PLEGGED: \$1 billion loan, April 2012.</p> <p>TRANSFERRED: \$500 million deposit in central bank, April 2012.</p> <p>PLEGGED: \$2 billion investment in an oil refinery, May 2012.</p> <p>PLEGGED: 20,000 jobs to unemployed Tunisian graduates, April 2012.</p>
Saudi Arabia	<p>PLEGGED: \$750 million, June 2011. No funds transferred to date.</p> <p>PLEGGED: Saudi Fund for Development pledged \$220 million for three loans (one for a power station, one for investment in gas transport, and one for vocational training), July 2012.</p>
UAE	<p>TRANSFERRED: \$200 million to revive the health system, June 2012.</p> <p>TRANSFERRED: Abu Dhabi Fund for Development granted a \$4.3 million loan (for Tunisia and Somalia), beginning of 2012.</p>

Gulf donors and investors also recognize that prospects for effective use of aid and investment capital are weak as long as the business climate in the transition states is characterized by a lack of clear rules, non-payment of commercial debts, lack of respect for contracts, and prosecution of prominent business people. They ask, “why would we invest in Egypt if Egyptians don’t have the confidence to invest themselves?”

Nonetheless, the economic challenges in the transition countries are increasing, and some Gulf business people recognize the destabilizing potential of a huge cadre of unemployed. Among some in the business community there is also a sense of responsibility or obligation to help their Arab brethren in Egypt or Jordan through their financial crises. One businessman told the author that a portion of oil profits resulting from price jumps during the Egyptian revolt should

be deployed by Gulf donors to support infrastructure projects in Egypt and elsewhere to provide jobs.

Looking ahead, a number of variables will influence how the Gulf and the United States react and offer support to Arab countries in transition. In the United States, a key factor will be the attitude of the newly-elected Congress toward foreign assistance in general and assistance to Islamist-dominated governments in particular. At the same time, there is private ambivalence in the Gulf about the Muslim Brotherhood accompanied by sharp public antagonism. After an IMF deal is concluded in Egypt, new funds might be made available; however, the continuing political maneuvering in Egypt increases risk while providing an excuse for hesitation by donors. In such an environment, Gulf donors will limit their commitments and may seek ways to assist more palatable partners in gaining political sway in the transition states. Thus, the prospects for a Marshall Plan approach are dim. More likely is a prolonged period of economic muddling through and political crisis management, with donors and investors continuing to play tentative supporting roles.

Iran Threat Spurring US/Gulf Security Ties

Finding common denominators in US and Gulf attitudes and policies toward the countries in transition will continue to be difficult. Locating common ground on regional security poses similar challenges. The United States and Gulf states have taken some steps to work together, for example in Libya and to some degree Syria, but approaches to regional security matters are also burdened with uncertainty and ambivalence.

Since the drawdown of US forces from Iraq, political-military cooperation between the United States and its Gulf partners has focused on dealing with the threat from Iran. The instruments of deterrence include improving the defense capabilities of Gulf states, encouraging cooperation on defensive systems, and upgrading US-Gulf consultation mechanisms. Gulf states have topped the list of buyers of US weapons systems for some time⁶ and these purchases have resulted in qualitative superiority of Gulf air forces over their Iranian counterpart. Gradual cooperation on defensive systems such as radar early-warning is taking place but at a painstakingly slow pace, and the issue remains at the forefront of the US agenda during consultations with the GCC states.

These consultations took on a new quality during 2012, with the creation of the US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum, which enhanced the annual US/GCC Foreign Ministers meeting with an additional session every six months.⁷ The United States has urged the GCC to include defense officials in their delegation in order to foster greater coordination. The United States would like to see a more integrated and effective GCC structure, particularly in linking GCC defense systems, which the US sees as critical to defending against Iranian missiles. However, there has been only incremental progress and GCC member states jealously protect their bilateral ties with the United States, and the United States has not forced the issue.

Changing Gulf State Military Role Outside the Gulf

As the individual members of the GCC improve their defenses, some have also begun in recent years to play a more active role in security operations outside the Gulf. The UAE worked with NATO forces in Afghanistan and Libya. Qatar played a large role in supporting the Libya uprising, contributing both funds and personnel, participating in NATO air attacks, financing opposition figures, and mobilizing support at the United Nations. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are assisting the opposition in Syria. Motivations for this increased engagement are diverse, and at times have been rooted in personal animosity towards leaders such as Muammar Qaddafi of Libya and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Both the UAE and Qatar want to demonstrate that they can punch above their weight in international diplomacy and security as part of their international branding campaigns, and the UAE also has been eager to demonstrate that it can be a capable military partner to the United States, as in Afghanistan. Saudi support for the Syrian opposition is widely seen as part of the larger objective to reduce Iranian influence in the region.

The out-of-area military actions by selected GCC states do not stem from a long-term coherent strategy adopted by individual states, much less by the GCC as a whole. They do not reflect a unified Gulf view on cooperating with NATO or the United States. They certainly do not represent any predilection to support broad-based movements against one-man or one-family rule. So far, these attempts to project

⁶ Richard F. Grimmett and Paul K. Kerr, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011," (Congressional Research Service), August 24, 2012.

⁷ See Department of State Media Note, October 1, 2012, Joint Communiqué From the Second Ministerial Meeting for the US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum and State Department Briefing on US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum, September 28, 2012.

Gulf military power outside the Gulf are based on idiosyncratic decisions related to particular circumstances. These specific decisions do not imply assumptions of a distinct responsibility for ensuring broad regional security in the Middle East, either in partnership with the United States or on their own.

In terms of security within the Gulf region itself, Gulf states have increased their investment in weapons systems and infrastructure in part due to their suspicions of the long-term durability of the United States as a security partner. Despite the US commitment to provide political and military assets to counter Iran, Gulf states worry that the United States could reach a grand bargain with Iran that fails to protect their interests. They also take seriously the US pivot to Asia and what that might mean for future US engagement in the Middle East. There is a clear recognition that the United States supplies a security umbrella for the Gulf, but one academic noted in an off-the-record session that the Gulf contribution in the form of bases and capabilities is undervalued by the United States. And as another noted, if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, Gulf states would feel pressure to obtain such capabilities in the Gulf because coming under any formal US nuclear umbrella would be unacceptable to Gulf public opinion.

On the surface it would seem easier to define common denominators on security issues than on the issues of democratic transitions, but in fact both of these files are plagued by uncertainty and suspicion. In both cases, there is a great need to find common denominators that serve both US and Gulf interests for the long-term.

An Agenda for Establishing Common Denominators

Given the continued congruence of interests between the GCC states and the United States, and the potential for the Gulf states to play an even greater regional and global role, now is the time to reexamine the partnership and de-conflict interests to the greatest extent possible. If such a dialogue is to result in a stronger renewed partnership, it will need to include:

- Developing broad consensus between Gulf states and the United States on how to respond to the economic needs of the Arab countries in transition. Both sides have significant interests at play but they are talking past each other. Regardless of attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood, the prospect of Egypt spiraling further into economic stagnation is in no one's interest. Finding ways

to deal with unpredictable change requires clear identification of differences and agreement to disagree where consensus is not available.

- Coming to agreement that supporting violence and other forms of uncompromising extremism, whether from al-Qaeda affiliates or other Salafi extremists, is dangerous. This issue has the potential to put the United States and select Gulf states on a collision course. The Gulf and the United States went through a long cycle of recrimination after 9/11 that would be exacerbated by a body of evidence of official or unofficial support for terrorists in the transition states.
- Making the wave of change in the region, including its manifestations inside Gulf countries, a subject of quiet but sustained discussion inside and outside of governments on both sides. No such official dialogue is taking place in any sustained way, with only fragments of limited private approaches finding echo in occasional public statements, where nuance is difficult and misinterpretation is the norm. Some would claim that such conversations represent interference in internal Gulf matters, but the minimal requirement for effective US foreign and security policy is to avoid surprises that could damage US interests.
- Ensuring that any solution to halting Iran's quest for nuclear weapons also takes into account the continuing threat to the Gulf from Iran unrelated to weapons of mass destruction. Failure to do so will play into the corrosive narrative that emerged from the Iraq war that the United States supported Shia ascendance in order to keep Sunnis off balance, and will make it even more difficult to work together on projects outside the Gulf.
- Examining in a systematic way what a durable, long-term security relationship will require. Key issues for the future are currently overtaken by the threat from Iran and steady militarization of the Gulf that is seen as favorable to US security and business interests. But there is no reason to expect this situation to be permanent, and current arrangements provide little guidance to policymakers on how to work with Gulf allies in addressing the regional security aspects of the Syrian civil war, for example. Issues related to the US presence in the Gulf itself should also be discussed in a broad and comprehensive way with the objective toward a long-term durable relationship.

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