



REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

# The Arab Cold War Redux

The Foreign Policy of the Gulf Cooperation Council States since 2011

FEBRUARY 28, 2017 — MICHAEL STEPHENS

*The Arab uprisings and their aftermath have precipitated the reshuffling of alliances, assertions of force, and a great deal of anxiety among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which was once somewhat placid. The rise of Iran's influence, the demise of old allies such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the United States' retrenchment from the region, and the spread of sectarian conflict in many of the eastern countries of the Arab world have all shaken the Gulf monarchies. Vying for influence and backing different factions in proxy conflicts, they have begun to assert themselves on the regional stage in unprecedented ways. But while conflict rages and regimes fall around them, the Gulf countries appear, for now, to be facing futures that are internally stable—even if they will exist in an increasingly fractious, unhappy, and hostile neighborhood.*

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The Arab uprisings of 2011 marked a watershed moment for the Middle East, and not just for those Arab states that underwent dramatic changes in their politics, but also for the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Vastly wealthy, with powerful western allies, the GCC states appeared as paragons of stability in comparison to many of their fellow Arab nations. But despite their relatively comfortable positions, Arab rulers of Gulf countries have struggled to fully come to terms with the monumental changes wrought by the Arab uprisings. Fearing for their own internal stability, the GCC as a block has resisted any external pressure to liberalize politically, with all states passing laws restricting freedom of speech and detaining vocal opposition.<sup>1</sup> Even Kuwait, so famed for its freedom of speech, has restricted behavior on social media platforms.<sup>2</sup> Although officials in the Gulf states<sup>3</sup> talked extensively about the meaning of representative change that swept across the region in 2011, it appeared that it only applied outside of their borders.<sup>4</sup>

As the Arab uprisings unfolded into a series of protracted civil wars, the Gulf states were drawn even further out of their comfort zones. Long known for preferring stability—or more precisely, the absence of rapid political change—and exercising caution in regional affairs, the GCC was awoken from its slumber by the collapse of the regional order that had existed for decades. In the five years since, the GCC has moved from being a relatively passive group of states, seeking to preserve the regional status quo and working quietly through financial donations to preferred partners, into an aggressive, hawkish group that has actively engineered social and political change (or prevented it) across a number of Middle Eastern nations.

The Gulf states played a pivotal role in the way that the Arab uprisings unfolded, manipulating their direction for seemingly altruistic, but ultimately self-interested goals. It is not the first time in modern history that the wealthy Gulf states have used their political, religious, and economic influence to shape and at times dominate other Arab governments. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular has long sought to project power in the region, directly intervening in Yemen in 1934, and using its money and patronage to support military groups in Yemen against Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt in the 1960s, and against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The maneuvers of Saudi Arabia and its

rivals in Egypt and Syria featured prominently in Malcolm Kerr's famous account of Arab politics, *The Arab Cold War*, which rightly located political agency in Arab capitals. Kerr provided a rare counterpoint to Western analysts who tended to exaggerate the impact of outside powers on Arab regional developments, like many policy makers and analysts today. The Gulf states could hardly have been described as passive observers in the three Gulf wars involving Iraq, in which they acted in close concert with American policy—first, backing Saddam Hussein against Iran, and then forcefully opposing him in 1990 and 2003. But the period since the Arab uprisings began in 2010–11 marks a turn to a more muscular and overt role for Gulf states in regional affairs. The Gulf's backseat influence has morphed into direct political interference, and even military action and expeditionary warfare in the case of Libya and Yemen. This newfound role is often underestimated by analysts and policymakers, and is likely to remain a prominent feature of regional politics in the coming years.



LEFT: MIDDLE EAST MAP, SOURCE: ISTOCKPHOTO; RIGHT: GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL LOGO, SOURCE: ISTOCKPHOTO

Importantly, the reaction of the Gulf states to the uprisings was not uniform. Hyperactive Qatar excitedly pushing for change across the region contrasted strongly with the more conservative, and status-quo-favoring Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, who mobilized to actively blunt Qatar's enthusiasm. The impact of the three most influential Gulf states playing their diametrically opposed agendas was hugely damaging for Arab democracy movements across the region. Revolutions in Syria, Egypt, and Libya turned sour as scores between Doha and Riyadh and Doha and Abu Dhabi were settled via weapons shipments, funds to proxy groups, and overt political interference. As each revolution began to break down, the Gulf troika became stuck in a cycle, playing out internal political divisions on the regional stage. The more the GCC's internal cracks grew, the more each country was drawn into activity at the regional level to blunt the interest of the others. Only by finally silencing Qatar through a concerted policy of threats and isolation could the Emirates and Saudi Arabia feel more at ease. And having solved internal GCC issues, Riyadh was free to focus on a threat that mattered far more than tiny Qatar—that posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.



The retrenchment of the United States from the Middle East, the external security guarantor of the Gulf in the post-1945 world, has fundamentally and perhaps permanently changed the attitude of the Gulf states to become more active in pursuing their own security interests. Worn down by the failure of the state-building project in Iraq that began in 2003, and the continued instability and conflict that have plagued the region, the administration of Barack Obama pursued the dual goals of resolving the nuclear question with the Islamic Republic of Iran and maintaining an increasingly strained set of alliances forged in the Cold War. Relations with Turkey, Israel, Egypt and the Gulf—so long the pillars of U.S. containment of Soviet interests in the region—have begun to seem outdated and increasingly transactional, rather than a reflection of shared values and strategic interests. The deteriorating relationship between Washington and Riyadh in particular has had a serious impact on the course of regional events. There is little doubt that a divergence has opened up between the United States and its most important regional ally,<sup>5</sup> most notably around the choice to engage with Iran, rather than aggressively contain it with continued sanctions and escalatory rhetoric.

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Saudi Arabia's traditional allies have been unable to check Iranian regional activity in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—Tehran has even been empowered by Western engagement with the country over its nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the belief in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the Emirates is that the price paid for Iran's signature to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is too high. Riyadh has reacted, with the rest of its GCC allies in tow, by seeking its own interests in the region, using a combination of military force and indirect military action through rebel groups. Only the Sultanate of Oman stands outside this consensus, maintaining a policy of neutrality and largely preferring not to be drawn into any undue tension with Tehran.

The long-term consequences of this aggressive, militaristic foreign policy for the region are yet to be seen, but there is little doubt that it has proven costly in both lives and finances. A war in Yemen involving a Saudi-led multinational coalition fighting against Houthi militias, now dragging toward the end of its second year, has resulted in the deaths of more than ten thousand Yemenis, according to latest United Nations estimates.<sup>7</sup> Although no official figure of GCC casualties has been released, Saudi Arabia has admitted that more than five hundred of its own citizens have been killed as well.<sup>8</sup> Riyadh has upped the ante in Syria, taking the leading role in sponsoring the opposition groups fighting the Iran-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad, thereby ensuring that that war has dragged on well through its fifth year. As

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Tehran and Riyadh lock horns in Yemen and across the Mashreq,<sup>9</sup> it appears that only escalation and increasing proxy battles lie on the horizon.

At a time of depressed oil prices, the hydrocarbon-exporting GCC nations are feeling the pinch, cutting government spending, removing fuel subsidies, and increasing the price of services to citizens.<sup>10</sup> This fiscal restraint may slightly temper Saudi Arabia's aggressive pursuit of regional security, but it is unlikely to be overly constraining. Regional instability comes at a cost, both in blood and treasure, and for the moment it appears one that Riyadh is willing to pay if it means Iran does not get its way.

## Master Strategy or Opportunism? The Rise of Qatar

Although Riyadh now holds sway over the direction of GCC foreign policy, it was not always so clear in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring. The turmoil and insecurity of the region in 2011 made an environment that was perfect for a small state like Qatar to operate. Too small to invade or occupy other regional states, it presented no existential threat to any, and Qatar's wealth meant that its finances could change the fortunes of any government with whom it did business. The previous decade had seen Qatar pursue a policy of mediation and balance, turning Doha into the "Geneva of the Mashreq."<sup>11</sup> All were welcome, from Hezbollah and Iran to Western think tanks and the Taliban, arriving in pursuit of Doha's riches and political backing. To top it all off, Qatar cemented its place on the world stage by winning the rights to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Having removed his father in a bloodless coup in 1995, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani—along with his cousin, Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani—set about constructing a grand vision to make Qatar a center of global activity, which would ensure its survival both politically and economically. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 had taught Sheikh Hamad a lesson: being rich did not guarantee security in an unstable region. But being influential in the world might.

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In 1996 Qatar established the Al Jazeera television station. The station gave Qatar enormous influence across the Arab world, giving it the space to test the manipulation of public opinion against political rivals. In 2000, Gulf scholar Simon

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Henderson wrote that “the station gives special attention to criticisms of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two governments that opposed the current emir of Qatar’s seizure of power from his father in 1995 and that have subsequently tried to destabilize his regime.”<sup>12</sup> *Al Jazeera* had landed the Qataris in hot water with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Kingdom withdrew its ambassador from Doha in 2002, in protest of critical comments made on the channel, and Egypt temporarily shut the station’s facilities in Cairo in 2000. Qatar had also irritated the Saudis in 2008–2009 by muscling in to negotiations in Lebanon, thereby usurping Saudi’s traditional influence over affairs there.<sup>13</sup> Long before the Arab uprisings, Qatar had built increasing numbers of friends across the region, showed a penchant for showy diplomatic initiatives, and displayed a taste for regional meddling, particularly with its television station. And so by December 2010 Qatar was well-positioned to take advantage of the chaos that would soon spread across the region.

Furthermore, the three hundred thousand or so Qatari citizens living lives of affluence, and secure in their employment at state-owned companies (often known as “Q” companies), posed no threat to the ruling house. Qatar’s business elites, too—tied into the ruling house through an intricate system of familial bonds and business relationships—posed little in the way of opposition to the decisions of the executive. This domestic comfort afforded Sheikh Hamad the freedom to think about foreign policy questions and pursue regional objectives that took his fancy. His GCC brothers, by contrast, were deeply concerned by the changing order of the region. The GCC as a collective was unable to make a calculation as to how to proceed, as regional allies fell one by one, and GCC member Bahrain began to tear itself apart under the weight of popular protest. Fearing the spread of the Arab uprisings into its own borders, Saudi Arabia instigated massive social spending programs, releasing tens of billions of dollars into the economy to alleviate housing shortages for younger Saudis, and pumping up its social welfare programmes.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Riyadh deployed GCC Peninsula Shield forces into Bahrain to ensure stability in the beleaguered monarchy. At the same time, Oman and Kuwait saw protests and domestic instability, which caused them to be embroiled in their own domestic problems, albeit to a lesser extent than Bahrain.

Unbridled by such concerns, Qatar ventured off into the region to begin refashioning regional politics. Qatar threw itself energetically into the politics of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, all of which possessed broken political systems that offered opportunities for Qatari money and influence to operate. Qatar also made the most of its long-standing connections to political Islamists who for decades had sought refuge in Doha—and spiritual counseling from religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the exiled clerical guide of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, who had moved to Doha in 1961. Qatar funneled cash, and in the case of Libya and Syria, weapons, to an assortment of political actors who broadly held a deeply Islamist view of participatory politics in the Middle East. These figures included Rachid al-Ghannouchi and his Ennahda party in Tunisia, Khalid Meshaal and Hamas in Palestine, Ali al-Sallabi and Abdelhakim Belhadj (the Commander of the Tripoli Military Council) in Libya, the government of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, and prominent figures in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the NCSROF) such as Mustafa

Sabbagh and Moaz al-Khatib.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Qatar nor any of the other Gulf states created the regional conditions that triggered the Arab uprisings. But there is little doubt that the Gulf states and Qatar in particular strongly affected the course of the uprisings as they broke out across the region. Doha played a vital role during the frenetic opening months, particularly as it shaped the emerging narratives of protest through the *Al Jazeera* network.<sup>16</sup> As protests in Tunisia spread to Egypt and gathered strength in January 2011, *Al Jazeera* coverage fanned the flames, constantly stressing the message of change, through the use of emotive language stressing youthfulness and the use of social media as a force for good in the region.<sup>17</sup> Presenting itself as the voice of the voiceless, Al Jazeera built a wider narrative of popular mobilization around the protests in Tunisia,<sup>18</sup> catalyzing street protests elsewhere. Doubtless the region was already a tinderbox ready to combust, but Al Jazeera's coverage only made the speed of change more dramatic and more acute.



GULF LEADERS GATHER AT THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL'S 35TH SUMMIT MEETING IN QATAR IN 2014. @WWW.GCC-SUMMIT.ORG

Qatar read the signs quickly, and further sought to become increasingly active in the diplomatic arena, capitalizing on the moment to morph social change into political change. The easiest way to achieve this was through the use of money, of which Qatar had plenty. As protests in both Tunisia and Egypt gave way to elections, Qatar boosted its support for its regional allies, the Tunisian Ennahda party and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Drawing on huge troves of Qatari financial support and favorable television coverage, both were brought to power, Ennahda in October 2011, with the

Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi narrowly winning the Egyptian Presidential election in June 2012. Gulf money poured in from Kuwait, the Emirates, and Qatar to support Tunisia, but it was most obviously Qatar that moved to support Ennahda, funding multimillion-dollar social projects, and bankrolling the party to the tune of nearly one billion dollars.<sup>19</sup> Although always careful to repeat the line that Qatar was supporting the will of the people, Doha was really making politically calculated choices. Just three months after Morsi was elected, Qatar once again moved in with its money. Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim promised that his country would invest a total of eighteen billion dollars in Egypt over five years, adding that there would be “no limits” to Qatar’s support.<sup>20</sup> It was an offer that had never been made to Hosni Mubarak. Qatar had not bought off the Arab street in either Tunis or Cairo, but it had empowered its friends in both countries to manipulate sentiments and successfully push forward political programs that Doha favored. The fact that there were willing and receptive audiences in both countries only served to convince the Al Thani that they were on the right side of history.

In Libya, Qatar went a step further, actively forcing the outcome of the revolutions that took place. It is highly unlikely that the diplomatic momentum required to authorize force against Muammar Qaddafi as he battled unrest within his country would have been possible without Qatari diplomatic activity.<sup>21</sup> With Saudi Arabia concerned with quelling unrest in Bahrain, Qatar and the Emirates stepped forward to push through an Arab League initiative on March 12, 2011 that supported a no-fly zone in Libya, and called on the UN Security Council to “establish safe areas” in the country.<sup>22</sup> Five days later the French put forward Security Council Resolution 1973, establishing a no-fly zone over Libya, and authorizing all necessary means to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas. It was unanimously passed, with only Russia and China abstaining. The resolution explicitly recognized “the important role of the League of Arab States in matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security in the region,” and requested that the League cooperate in the protection of civilians.<sup>23</sup>

True to the spirit of Resolution 1973, the Emirates and Qatar extended vital logistical and material support to the Libyan rebels. In 2011, the Emirates hosted meetings of Libyan provincial and tribal representatives, and both countries hosted meetings of the International Contact Group for Libya, which convened dozens of countries who wished to assist with Qaddafi’s overthrow. Qatar provided some \$400 million worth of nonmilitary assistance to the rebels.<sup>24</sup> Qatar was also one of the first countries to recognize the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people. NTC chairman Mahmoud Jibril was largely based in Doha throughout the revolution, coordinating policy from its glitzy hotels rather than from inside the rebel stronghold of Benghazi.<sup>25</sup> But Qatar went further than just providing aid and political support to the uprising. Qatari special forces reportedly provided basic infantry training to Libyan rebel fighters in the Nafusa Mountains, to the west of Tripoli. And in eastern Libya, Qatari fighters were also in



the thick of the fight to take Qaddafi's Bab al-Azizia compound on August 24, 2011, placing a Qatari flag on top of the building after its capture.<sup>26</sup> To top it off, Qatari and Emirati aircraft took to the skies alongside NATO aircraft. Qaddafi, Libya's indomitable strongman for forty-two years, was on the run; rebels caught and killed him on October 20, 2011.

Buoyed by the success of Libya, the Qataris grew in confidence and Sheikh Hamad sought to keep up the momentum.<sup>27</sup> Qatar believed that it could also change Syria for the better and force Assad to either reform, or step down. Doha largely focused on forming strategies to engineer political change through external pressure. But understanding that it could not act without international support, Qatar intensified its pressure on the Assad regime through the international community, and with Saudi backing pushed through support for an Arab League monitoring mission in December 2011. The mission ended in failure just one month later, but both Qatar and Saudi Arabia had already begun to seek military alternatives. However, it was the international community's inability to act to stop Assad that really began to trigger Gulf pressure. Doha openly declared its support for regime change in February 2012, urging the international community to arm the Syrian opposition and to help them to overthrow Assad "by all means."<sup>28</sup>

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While both Saudi Arabia and Qatar were visibly angered at the continuing violence in Syria, and felt a sense of moral duty to act, they were equally concerned with appearing to be leaders. Both countries held high hopes for remolding Arab politics, and were eager for the Arab League to take up a larger role in security.<sup>29</sup> Despite the lack of action in the UN Security Council to stop Assad, by mid-2013 there had been some limited successes. By November 2012 thirty-one countries and the EU had extended full diplomatic recognition to the NCSROF (the Syrian National Coalition) as the "sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people." Moaz al-Khatib was installed as the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic in place of Bashar al-Assad at an Arab League summit in Doha in March 2013. Meanwhile, Qatar ally and Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi became Egypt's representative. At the same time, Qatar inaugurated the first Syrian Arab Republic Embassy in Doha, which flew the flag of the revolutionary forces, in an attempt to firmly cement the future of a new Syria without Assad.<sup>30</sup> Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani highlighted the involvement in Syria and Libya as "examples of Arab League reform."<sup>31</sup>

**Qatar's Fall from Grace, a GCC Divided**

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But Qatar's support for governments that had benefitted from the Arab uprisings was not backed up with a long-term strategy. Doha had assembled influence across a swathe of Middle Eastern states, ranging from Tunisia to Turkey, but no sooner had this regional belt of influence been assembled than the cracks began to appear. While Morsi basked in the grand surroundings of his Qatari friends at the Arab League Summit, the public mood at home was railing against him. Increasing numbers of Egyptians expressed their rage at both his floundering government and also at Qatar, some going so far as to burn Qatari flags in the streets.<sup>32</sup> Egyptian television satirist Bassem Yousef mocked Qatar's increasing influence in his country, to widespread popular support. Similar scenes occurred in Tunisia and Libya, as angry protesters decried what they saw as Qatari interference in their affairs.<sup>33</sup> Qatar, for its part, seemed almost oblivious of the troubles, maintaining its steadfast and rather tired line that it supported "the will of the people" across the region.<sup>34</sup> But Qatar's investment in Egypt was beginning to look like a big mistake. For all the money that had been invested in propping up the Morsi government (an estimated eight billion dollars in loans and deposits into the Central Bank of Egypt),<sup>35</sup> Qatar appeared to be getting only problems in return. Morsi's repeated failures to quell growing dissent in his own country were beginning to tar Qatar's legacy as well.

Saudi Arabia and the Emirates for their part had never supported the removal of Mubarak in 2011. As Qatar's television station was whipping up anti-Mubarak sentiment, both countries had sent messages of support to the beleaguered dictator, urging him to stay in power by all means necessary.<sup>36</sup> Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were deeply resistant to the idea of a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, and in particular were resentful that Qatar had been such a major force in orchestrating the change. The Emirati anger was based on the competing visions of regional order and stability held by Sheikh Hamad, whose preference for dealing with Islamist actors ran contrary to that of Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. Mohammed bin Zayed and, by extension, most of the government believe that an Islamist model of government in the Emirates would upset the delicate balance of running a conservative Muslim society with a large non-Muslim expatriate population who enjoy widespread social liberties. Fiercely opposed to any internal opposition to its rule (especially from those who espouse Islamist alternatives to the current ruling bargain or had connections to the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated *Islah* party),<sup>37</sup> Abu Dhabi chafed at the idea that rival ideological platforms that could influence its own polity were being given succor in a country less than forty minutes drive from its borders. In contrast, Qatar saw nothing wrong with the housing and support of such actors, believing that the popular will of the region's peoples would surely be expressed through an Islamic representative politics in some form. Thus, to support those actors who actively sought such reform was necessary for long-term regional stability.

In July 2013, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia backed a military coup in Egypt that swiftly removed Morsi, Qatar's strongest regional ally.<sup>38</sup> Qatar was helpless to stop the unfolding drama, and with no friends inside the Egyptian military they had only their money and their Muslim Brotherhood contacts to make desperate pleas on *Al Jazeera* to stop the change.<sup>39</sup> When forces loyal to then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah el-Sisi killed hundreds of Morsi-supporting

protesters in Rabaa Square on August 14, 2013, both the Emiratis and Saudis blamed the protesters, and doubled down on their support for Sisi.<sup>40</sup> The Gulf's internal disputes about regional change were becoming far more than petty ideological squabbles between rich princes: they were now costing lives.

As the hopeful protests in Libya and Syria mutated into grinding civil war, Qatar became more embroiled in military matters, arming and funding proxy militias, while futilely pursuing increasingly distorted utopian political goals. In Libya, Qatar's choice of Islamist friends was beginning to backfire badly. Libya descended into a chaotic mess of fractious militias.<sup>41</sup> The lack of security led to a number of serious incidents, as brigands attacked aid convoys, diplomatic missions, and even the parliament building, forcing the resignation of five ministers. On September 11, 2012 militant Islamists allegedly connected to Ansar al-Sharia attacked the United States mission in Benghazi, killing the American ambassador, Christopher Stevens, and three contractors working for the Central Intelligence Agency. Ansar al-Sharia possessed close operational links to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (designated a terrorist organization by the United States in 2004), whose former leader, Abdelhakim Belhadj—who had become the commander of the Tripoli Military Council—was a long-term favorite of Doha. While Qatar cannot be said to have known about the attack, it raised troubling questions about the company the country chose to keep.

Libya's increasingly fractured politics exposed Doha's paucity of understanding of the country's tribal politics and lack of institutions. By continually backing Islamists at the expense of more moderate groups, Doha spurred a series of counter-movements against it, pulling apart what little consensus existed after Qaddafi's ouster, and leading to the eventual split in administrations between Tripoli and Benghazi. That the Emirates felt increasingly frustrated and worked directly against Qatari goals served only to entrench preexisting divisions. It was this friction that complicated the task of unifying the anti-Qaddafi movement from its earliest phases and contributed to the subsequent splintering of the movement after it came to power in October 2011.<sup>42</sup> Qatar had also become increasingly unpopular among ordinary Libyans, who resented that external actors had taken their revolution from them.<sup>43</sup> As if to seal Qatar's sinking popularity, Doha favorite Belhadj lost his election for the General National Congress in July 2012. There was little doubt that his association with Qatar was a hindrance.

Syria further helped to undo Qatar, as it butted heads with another GCC partner, Saudi Arabia. As Chair of the Arab League for 2011–12, Qatar had failed to produce a consensus for an armed intervention in Syria, as it had done for Libya.<sup>44</sup> Doha's frustration at the lack of progress boiled over into a policy of arming Syrian rebel groups that appeared highly dubious to both Arab and Western nations alike.<sup>45</sup> The policy was shoddy and poorly coordinated, and knowing that funds and weapons were available, "an expanding pool of middlemen" began to appear in Doha looking for money and guns to run into Syria.<sup>46</sup>

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To complicate matters, Qatar and Saudi Arabia held strong differences over how the rebellion should be managed and “prioritized their own agendas ahead of forging a united and effective opposition grouping.”<sup>47</sup> Both Doha and Riyadh largely agreed that Assad should step down, but their motivations for doing so were quite different. Qatar by and large supported actors with close connections to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, with whom it tried to populate the main opposition Syrian National Council (SNC). Rather than favor one group, Riyadh was more focused on building a coalition of Syrians that would push growing Iranian influence out of the country.<sup>48</sup> The Saudis were also deeply suspicious of Qatar’s relationship with the Brotherhood and objected to the SNC being populated with Qatar-backed Brotherhood members. By 2013, as the war moved well into its second year, Saudi and Qatari differences over the composition and leadership of the opposition—by then represented by the NCSROF, which the SNC joined—began to pull apart the already fractured movement.

The culmination of Doha and Riyadh’s interference was the resignation of Moaz al-Khatib, the one man among a series of little-known opposition leaders who held credibility among the general Syrian population.<sup>49</sup> In an interview in May 2013, Khatib did not pull his punches, blaming “two regional countries that sponsored their own candidates, and pulled apart the opposition.”<sup>50</sup> As for the much-feted opposition embassy in Doha, it became merely a house with a flag, from which the remaining pro-Qatar NCSROF members increasingly struggled to exert any political authority. By mid-2013 Saudi Arabia had effectively pushed Qatar aside, with the Doha-backed Mustafa Sabbagh losing out to the Riyadh-favored Ahmad Jarba in an opposition leadership contest.<sup>51</sup>

The cases of Egypt, Syria, and Libya show that Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates had become deeply angered at Qatar’s regional meddling; believing that Doha’s alliance with militant Islamist actors, especially the Brotherhood, was detrimental to the security not only of the region, but more specifically the monarchies of the GCC.<sup>52</sup> This internecine bickering colored the revolutions in both Libya and Syria, and while revolutionaries in both nations benefitted from Gulf weapons and finances, allowing them to continue their fight against the regimes of Assad and Qaddafi, these gifts were not agenda-free. Meanwhile, Gulf games over Syria’s opposition became a sideshow in comparison to the Russian and Iranian military interventions to keep Assad in power. The period of Qatari-Saudi infighting in 2012–13 dealt a crucial blow to the effectiveness of the opposition during the Syrian conflict’s earlier years, undermining its image and credibility as government in waiting. It is not possible to know whether a more united opposition, composed of fewer



Sunni Islamists and less colored by Gulf interests, would have been more palatable to either Russia or Iran, thereby causing them to drop Assad. But the opposition's weakness provided Assad and his backers with all the ammunition they would ever need to reject negotiations with a motley crew of misfits that had no unified agenda or support inside Syria.

As for Egypt, the revolution that swept the streets in January 2011 was stolen from the people. Morsi was not the enlightened reformer Qatar had painted him to be, but neither was he the villain portrayed by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Qatar's rush to artificially prop up the Morsi government at a time in which it was failing blinded the Brotherhood to its troubles, and caused it to cling to power when a compromise might have proven wiser. Regardless of Morsi's mistakes, what followed was nothing less than a brutal destruction of the last vestiges of the Egyptian revolution. That the coup received the immediate blessing of both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi only strengthens the argument that the Gulf had a substantial hand in ending the Egyptian revolution.

At this point it is also important to remember that for all their regional meddling, Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh were united in their positions on the unrest in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Bahrain's protests were notably absent from *Al Jazeera's* Arabic-language coverage, and the little coverage that did exist placed the blame for civil unrest squarely at the feet of Iran.<sup>53</sup> The notion that legitimate domestic unrest might have arisen in one of their own wastoo much to champion, even for change-loving Qatar.<sup>54</sup>

## Bringing Qatar to Heel, the GCC Acts

In 2014, the Emirates took their disagreements with Qatar to a new level by orchestrating a smear campaign against Doha in order to break its image in Western capitals.<sup>55</sup> Doha's name began to sink deeper and deeper into the mud, saddled with continued allegations in the press of appalling human rights records, and dirty financial dealings connected to its right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup,<sup>56</sup> alongside numerous accusations from media and politicians alike that Qatar was deeply connected to global terrorist networks.<sup>57</sup> Qatar had once been on the ascendancy, the subject of numerous articles about "punching above its weight,"<sup>58</sup> and its enormous wealth. Now, the country found itself in desperate trouble. Crucially, Qatar's shining jewel in the crown, *Al Jazeera*, was haemorrhaging viewers. As conflicts across the region worsened, the station's coverage became increasingly one-sided, giving Sunni Islamists more and more preferential treatment, and pushing overtly political agendas that seemed to mirror Qatar's foreign policy objectives. Even *Al Jazeera's* historically more balanced English language channel punished journalists who did not tow the line.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere in the region the media company was banned from operating—as occurred in Egypt and Iraq—and its

journalists faced harassment and unlawful imprisonment.<sup>60</sup> The once dynamic, nimble state and friend to all, with its television channel that espoused hope and change across the region, began to look more like an international pariah, with an overtly sectarian agenda, and troublesome penchant for military interventions.<sup>61</sup>

Not only did Qatar find itself rapidly declining in regional influence, but it also became the victim of a concerted attempt by Bahrain, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to ostracize it. The young Qatari emir Tamim bin Hamad rebuffed repeated attempts by Saudi Arabia to convince him to roll back his country's regional influence, and to quiet Brotherhood activists based in Doha who openly criticized Sisi. But Saudi patience broke on March 5, 2014 and, alongside the Emirates and Bahrain, it pulled its ambassador from Doha, alleging "interference" in internal affairs, thereby triggering the most serious internal crisis in the GCC since its formation in 1981. To further turn the screw on Doha, two days later Saudi Arabia declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.<sup>62</sup> The attempt by Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama to quash Qatari ambitions revealed the disunity of the GCC's six states on regional policy issues, ranging from the role of political Islam in the politics of the region, to the solidarity of a united front against Iran. Additionally, the lengths to which both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh went to force the renegade Qatar to heel show their level of discomfort for rival political ideologies in the Sunni world that they themselves could not control. Riyadh's ruling bargain with the clerical establishment, which forms the backbone of the family's legitimacy to rule, requires that no Islamic political movement challenge that status quo. Accordingly, the Saudi Arabia of King Abdullah moved ruthlessly in step with Abu Dhabi to snuff out the threat of rival Islamist political actors, by breaking Qatar's adventurism before any such activity could take root across the Gulf.

It has taken time, but the strength of Saudi resolve effectively forced Qatar's rulers to bend to Riyadh's will. Qatar slowly ratcheted down its regional activity, and prevented Brotherhood blowhards from making overt statements contrary to Saudi interests. Going even further to placate the Saudis, in September 2014 a number of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood activists left Doha in order "to avoid causing any embarrassment for the State of Qatar."<sup>63</sup> Under King Salman, Saudi Arabia has lessened its hardline stance on the Brotherhood,<sup>64</sup> and restarted full diplomatic relations with Qatar, finalized by Salman's visit to Doha in December 2016, which serves as the most overt signal from Saudi Arabia that Qatar was once again back in Riyadh's good books.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Riyadh's boisterous return to regional ascendancy has by and large forced the Emirates and Qatar to acknowledge its leadership on all regional, political and security challenges. Following the change of administration in Riyadh following the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, and the accordant Saudi focus on Iran and the Islamic State as the main sources of regional insecurity, any remaining Qatari-Emirati squabbles over the Muslim Brotherhood have been relegated to tertiary status in Riyadh.

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But pictures of Gulf monarchs sword-dancing in Doha do not mean the damage has fully healed. The significance of the Qatari-Emirati split, and the resulting withdrawal of ambassadors, will have ramifications for many years and its impacts across the region are still being felt. In direct defiance of Emirati anger, Qatar has never quite given up its myriad of Islamist friendships across the region, although it has certainly been much less visible in how it maintains them. The result is that the two countries still hold diametrically opposed views on a number of regional files. This is most notable in the case of Libya, where Qatar's backing of Misrata militias, with connections to militants in Benghazi, is completely divergent to the Emirates' backing of General Khalifa Haftar. And so despite both countries nominally supporting the Government of National Accord, they have both abetted the fragmentation of the Libyan state and remained very clear obstacles to the restoration of a unified government in the country. Qatari officials still privately mumble about the illegality of Sisi's rule in Egypt. Lastly, the status and power of Turkey in the region under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan—whose nation was staunchly against the 2013 coup in Egypt—has still built a strong alliance with Qatar cemented by the deployment of Turkish troops in Doha in January 2016, to serve on Turkey's first military base in the Gulf. Qatar's alliance with Turkey is one that appears uniquely strong in the Gulf, described by one Turkish scholar as a "special bond."<sup>66</sup> Even though Riyadh has also begun to warm its ties with Ankara, and has "sought to develop a set of close defense and security relationships,"<sup>67</sup> the relationship appears pragmatic and highly transactional, lacking in the warmth that the Doha-Ankara axis displays. Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, took some months to adjust to this new reality, finally ending a three-year feud with Ankara in late April 2016.<sup>68</sup> On the issue of Ankara's hostility to Sisi, Abu Dhabi's Al Nahyan family has understood it is better to not undermine Saudi Arabia's strategic relationship with the Turks, and calculated that it is an irritant they will have to accept for the time being.

## **Saudi Arabia's Bid for Primacy and the Struggle against Iran**

Quite apart from being browbeaten into submission by its neighbors, Qatar's rise to the top would always be dependent on regional conditions. As regional stability and security plummeted following the Islamic State offensive across Syria and Iraq in June 2014, Iranian, Turkish, and Western military forces were dragged in. Six months later Yemen too began to destabilize following the collapse of the GCC-backed government of Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and Qatar's inability

to project hard power meant that it increasingly took a back seat to those actors who possessed hard power in abundance, and had the willingness to deploy it extraterritorially. Thus the stage was set for Saudi Arabia to mobilize its vast wealth and military resources to take on the challenge of restabilizing the region, and as Qatar's influence waned Riyadh began to find its voice. Saudi foreign policy had for decades been cautious and risk averse. From King Faisal to King Abdullah, the kingdom avoided conflict if possible and preferred covert action to high-profile military intervention.<sup>69</sup> But the signs that Saudi Arabia was awakening from its slumber had been long in coming, far preceding Doha's attempts at regional leadership.

Alarmed by the potential for its most potent regional rival, Iran, to capitalize on the instability sweeping the Arab world, the Kingdom had looked to its closest partner, the United States, for reassurance. But Riyadh found the Obama administration largely unwilling to secure Saudi interests with bold and assertive moves. Indeed, as Riyadh looked around at a collapsing regional order, Washington appeared to be doing nothing. Rather than support Saudi ally and regional lynchpin Mubarak in Egypt in January 2011, the Obama administration effectively removed all support for him. At the same time, lukewarm American support for Bahrain as it struggled under the weight of mass protests also piqued the House of Saud, alongside what appeared American unwillingness to take the fight to Assad, as had been done against Qaddafi. Even more concerning was the increasing realization that the United States would likely seek to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program.

Saudi cages were rattled, and in mid-2011 in a speech at RAF Molesworth, Prince Turki al-Faisal, Riyadh's unofficial official, clearly spelled out that the Kingdom was losing patience with its Western allies on a number of regional security issues. Included in the speech was the veiled threat that, as a report of the off-the-record remarks put it, "Iran [developing] a nuclear weapon would compel Saudi Arabia ... to pursue policies which could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences."<sup>70</sup> Prince Turki again spelled out Saudi frustrations before a vote to recognize a Palestinian state at the UN General Assembly, in which he noted that by failing to recognize Palestine's importance "the United States would further undermine its relations with the Muslim world, empower Iran and threaten regional stability" meaning that "Saudi Arabia would be forced to adopt a far more independent and assertive foreign policy."<sup>71</sup> It was an ominous sign of things to come, and a warning that was largely ignored by Kingdom watchers and Western policy analysts.

This build-up of Saudi frustrations over several years is important to understand within the context of Saudi Arabia's currently aggressive regional role. Riyadh's regional activism is often attributed to the death of King Abdullah, and the rise to power of his half-brother King Salman, whose son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has accrued power across a swathe of the Kingdom's domestic and foreign policy files. Although the rise of Prince Mohammed, at just thirty years of age, is indeed remarkable in a cultural milieu that values age and experience, there is a tendency to overestimate the impact of Prince Mohammed on foreign policy, attributing almost all Riyadh's adventurism to him.<sup>72</sup> While this may be



a suitable argument for the Kingdom's enemies to tout—particularly in Iran where Prince Mohammed is seen as a dangerous and reckless youth<sup>73</sup>—it is both inaccurate, and misunderstands that Saudi calculations were being recalibrated far in advance of the young prince's rise.

Many thinkers across the Gulf—and not just Prince Mohammed—view Iran's regional activities as blatant interference in Arab lands by an external non-Arab power that has no business being there.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, with the exception of Oman, Iran has been seen by all the Gulf states as a geostrategic threat and regional competitor for decades. Relations between the Arab and the Persian side of the Gulf have waxed and waned since the coming to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979. But for the most part the Arab countries of the Gulf could count on a combination of regional allies (or competitors in the case of Iraq's Saddam Hussein) and the United States to contain Iran. The environment after the Arab uprisings shook both pillars of this understanding, leaving Saudi Arabia feeling increasingly alone as it faced down what it perceived to be an aggressive expansionist foe. Furthermore, Iran's commitment to Shia Arab movements is seen as having foisted sectarianism upon the region, triggering the rise of extremist groups such as the Islamic State who are able to recruit from Sunni populations who seek to defend themselves.<sup>75</sup> Of particular concern to Riyadh is the way Iran empowers nonstate actors—such as Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, or the Shia militias in Iraq—to do its regional bidding.<sup>76</sup> The belief is that these Iranian allies actively seek to monopolize political power; and that Iran encourages its proxies to feed off the instability and dysfunction of the states within which they operate, in order to solidify Tehran's control of security. Under this paradigm, some Sunnis in the region see the emergence of a radically violent anti-Shia group like the Islamic State as a natural reaction to attempted Iranian subversion.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the Saudi government feels duty-bound to step in to prevent Iran from pushing its weight around, because it does not believe the Americans or Europeans are willing to do so. For Riyadh, that means both getting its own house in order by dampening down intra-GCC disputes, and secondly, following a more aggressive policy of containing and confronting Iran using every means short of a direct confrontation. That Riyadh experienced a change of monarch in the middle of pursuing these joint goals does not necessarily mean that it would have followed a different path without that succession.

## Combatting the Dual Threat of ISIS and Iran

The war in Syria in many ways typifies the problem that Riyadh and the rest of the Gulf face. Deeply hostile to the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its Iranian allies, the Gulf states—in particular Qatar and now predominantly Saudi Arabia—tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to build a credible alternative opposition coalition that would replace the regime, and usher in a new system of government, thereby rolling back any Iranian presence in the country. Support for the opposition has stretched into trying to directly influence the military course of the war, and Saudi Arabia, alongside

Qatar, has been deeply involved in the supply of arms and logistical support to Syria. The de facto division of labor that pulled the opposition apart also existed in relation to armaments. Turkey and Qatar ran weapons shipments in through the northern border, while Saudi Arabia and Jordan took responsibility for rebels in the south. The creation of the Army of Conquest in early 2015—a conglomeration of Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda affiliate the Nusra Front (which renamed itself Fateh al-Sham in July 2016, and claims to have cut ties with al-Qaeda)—was supposed to bring a more joined approach between Riyadh, Doha, and Ankara. But to this day Riyadh has remained uncomfortable with being too close to the hardline groups that are supported by Qatar such as Ahrar al-Sham, whose links to al-Qaeda are a source of great concern to Saudi Arabia's Western allies.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, with the oversight of the United States, Riyadh has continued to funnel finances and arms toward vetted rebel groups, in an attempt to keep the fight against the regime alive, and push back against both the Islamic State and the Kurdish militia YPG (People's Protection Units) operating in the countryside surrounding Aleppo.<sup>79</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states view Assad as a staunch ally of Iran and promoter of sectarian Shia interests. But this was not the general view held by the Gulf in the first stages of the conflict.<sup>80</sup> On the contrary, the Gulf states were extremely cautious in their approach to Damascus, and it was not until August 2011, when the death toll in the Syrian uprising passed two thousand, that opinions in the Gulf began to harden significantly against the Syrian regime, and the GCC states recalled their ambassadors from the country.<sup>81</sup> Attempts from both Qatar and the Emirates to reason with Assad were rebuffed and by the end of that year, the Gulf states had firmly taken the position that Assad had to leave power. However, the sectarian lens through which the Gulf viewed the conflict was still largely absent until the entry of Hezbollah into the war during the battle for al-Qusayr in 2013.

The Iran-backed group's intervention sparked outrage in the Gulf states, and had a dramatic impact on the political rhetoric surrounding the conflict. Prominent Sunni clerics in the Gulf began to use more overtly sectarian language to describe the war, with Yusuf al-Qaradawi calling Hezbollah (which means "the Party of God"), "Hezb al-Shaytan," the party of Satan. "The leader of the party of Satan comes to fight the Sunnis," Qaradawi said in June 2013. "Every Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that [must] make himself available."<sup>82</sup> This position was strongly endorsed by the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz al-Sheikh and other leading Sunni clerics.<sup>83</sup> Prominent Arab media outlets from the Gulf also responded, blocking the speeches of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's general secretary, from being published or broadcast. Regional media—along with Western media, to a lesser degree—increasingly framed the conflict in sectarian and anti-Iranian terms.<sup>84</sup> This heavily sectarianized rhetoric continues to pervade news coverage and commentary in the Gulf.<sup>85</sup>

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## The notion that Iran with its proxy groups blunts the power of the Arabs to control their own affairs is a far more important component of Gulf frustrations than is the belief that the entire region will become dominated by Twelver Shia Islam.

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The reluctance of the Obama administration to take on Assad regime forces after the use of chemical weapons in August 2013 proved a watershed moment. For the Arab countries of the Gulf, this permanently solidified the view that the United States could no longer be relied upon to lead on regional security matters. If the Gulf wanted to see the end of Assad they would have to do it themselves.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the entry of Russia into the conflict in the fall of 2015 has made Assad impervious to Gulf attempts to remove him (through either diplomacy or by force). The result is that the Gulf states have been reduced to being influential but not decisive in the Syrian war. The United States' choice not to confront Russia over its ironclad support for Assad has left the Gulf frustrated and angry at the current situation, but largely powerless to do anything about it.<sup>87</sup> This frustration was most clearly demonstrated during the rapid collapse of Gulf-sponsored militias inside Eastern Aleppo in December 2016. The rebels were powerless to fight back against the relentless onslaught of Assad's forces, backed in turn by overwhelming Russian airpower. Gulf interests, particularly in the north of the country, have become limited to protecting dwindling proxy groups that have been largely co-opted by hardline Islamist factions, such as Fateh al-Sham.<sup>88</sup>

In Iraq the situation is even bleaker. Unlike Syria where the Gulf states possess links to opposition groups fighting Assad, and thereby hold some sway over the future of the country, they hold little to no influence over the Iraqi state, which has gradually moved closer to Iran's orbit over the past decade. Relations between Iraq and the Gulf states are poor,<sup>89</sup> and recent Saudi attempts to fix diplomatic ties have gone badly. The first Saudi Ambassador to Iraq in twenty-six years was given his marching orders by Baghdad just seven months into his posting, after making highly critical comments about the role of Iraqi paramilitary organizations linked to Iran inside the country.<sup>90</sup> The Gulf rued the day Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his State of Law Coalition strengthened their grip on power in Iraq's 2010 elections. With the help of some behind-the-scenes power brokering from Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, differing Shia factions were persuaded to coalesce around the prime minister, thereby maintaining Shia dominance in the country.<sup>91</sup> The factions accomplished this despite Maliki securing fewer seats than the Gulf-backed secularist Ayad Allawi. The late King Abdullah's hatred for Maliki and his behavior has been well-documented,<sup>92</sup> and Qatar and the Emirates had no affection for the man either.<sup>93</sup> However, there was little they could do to swing the balance: Maliki's ever-strengthening grip on the state and its security services was backed by Iranian support—and of course, by the United States as well, which sought to maintain the illusion that, despite Maliki's increasing authoritarianism, democracy was alive and well.

Therefore, the uprising of Iraq's Sunnis in Fallujah in late 2013 and then the rapid emergence of the Islamic State (known as ISIS at the time) in June 2014, which shook the Iraqi state to its core, met with a degree of sympathy from the Gulf states. The messaging emerging from the Gulf after the Islamic State swept across Iraq reflected a sense that there was real disenfranchisement and anger among Iraq's Sunnis that needed to be addressed.<sup>94</sup> However, the way in which the Islamic State united a fractious coalition of tribes, ex-Ba'athists, and disgruntled Sunnis into a nihilistic killing machine bent on exterminating anybody who did not align with its narrow vision of Islam and politics caused the Gulf states to rapidly temper their views on the group. Additionally, the Islamic State's leadership rapidly expanded its ambitions to the entirety of the Middle East, clearly indicating that the Gulf states could be its next target. In November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's self-appointed caliph, declared: "O sons of al-Haramayn ... the serpent's head and the stronghold of the disease are there ... draw your swords and divorce life, because there should be no security for the Saloul."<sup>95</sup> Al-Baghdadi's choice of words was designed to provoke; his sneering use of the word "Saloul" (the family who guarded the shrine of the Kaaba in pagan pre-Islamic times) to describe the House of Saud was deliberately insulting, his reference to Saudi Arabia as the "Haramayn" (two holy Mosques) noted a complete disregard for the king's status as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," implying that the House of Saud had no legitimacy to rule. Almost overnight the Islamic State turned from being a serious problem for the Gulf into an enemy of all Gulf regimes—and it needed to be destroyed.

In 2014, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, possessing by far the best-equipped and numerically strongest air forces in the region, launched strikes in the earliest days of the Syrian chapter of the United States-led campaign against the Islamic State, Operation Inherent Resolve, while Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait largely limited their role to logistical and basing support. Results were initially positive, most notably during the Islamic State's siege of Kobane, Syria in the autumn and winter of 2014, in which both Saudi and Emirati planes struck frequently, providing the Syrian Kurds on the ground with much-needed air support. However, the level of Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's activity against the Islamic State dropped drastically after the opening two months of Operation Inherent Resolve. To the south a crisis far more pressing and closer to home was brewing in Yemen, which would quickly swallow up the lion's share of Saudi Arabia's military and diplomatic resources.

## Distracted by Yemen, the Fight against the Islamic State Takes a Back Seat



Saudi Arabia looked on in alarm as the Houthi rebels took over the capital of Sanaa in September 2014 before driving the GCC-backed government of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi into exile in the southern city of Aden in February 2015. To make matters worse, a swift push south into Aden by Houthi militias forced Hadi to flee to Riyadh, affording Iran's allies all but total control over the country.<sup>96</sup> In the face of this development, Riyadh reassessed its threat perception. Although the Islamic State posed an imminent danger to the countries of the GCC, particularly ideologically, it did not present a direct military threat in the way that the Iran-supported Houthis in Yemen did. Iran would not be allowed to destabilize Saudi Arabia on its southern flank by entering Riyadh's historic back yard. The level of Iranian support for the Houthis, a Shia group that emerged in the 1990s, has long been a topic of debate. Former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh often exaggerated the extent of Iranian influence on the Houthis as he sought Saudi support for military operations against them. Nevertheless, some links did exist between patriarch Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi and the Iranians, and key individuals of the Houthi movement were in contact with Iranian state.<sup>97</sup> But for Saudi Arabia, there was little distinction to be made, and the defeat of the Houthis and their Iranian backers became the immediate priority for military action, a must-win for the new King Salman and his recently promoted son Prince Mohammed.<sup>98</sup> Saudi thinkers expressed confidence that once Yemen had been secured, all attention could be turned to Syria and Assad, shutting Iran out of the region once and for all.<sup>99</sup>

And so the bulk of Gulf military power was moved to Saudi Arabia's southern borders. The Saudis and Emiratis conducted tens of sorties a day, with strikes peaking as high as 126 a day.<sup>100</sup> As with Operation Inherent Resolve, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia became the most heavily involved in pushing back the Houthis. The two countries have provided not only air power but also training to Yemeni forces, as well as deploying troops and armored vehicles in a fierce attempt to turn the tide against the rebels,<sup>101</sup> although Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait have also become increasingly involved, and sent substantial numbers of troops as the war escalated in the latter half of 2015.<sup>102</sup> Once again Oman did not support military action in Yemen, preferring to stand outside of the GCC consensus on the matter. Long valuing its relationship with Tehran, Muscat refused to be drawn into a conflict that had the potential to bring its GCC partners and the Iranians into a direct confrontation. For the West's part, the United States and the United Kingdom, with their long-standing security and defense relationships with Saudi Arabia, felt a sense of obligation to support the adventure. Along with the French they pushed through UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (managing to secure a Russian abstention) to back Hadi's government, and ordering the Houthis to demobilize. This support translated into military and technical assistance, with both nations providing advisers and trainers to the joint operations center in Riyadh, and delivering emergency supplies of cruise missiles and air-to-ground missiles for the Royal Saudi Air Force.<sup>103</sup>

Despite international support at the war's outset, the Yemen campaign has become a real headache for the Gulf states. Although the Houthis remain out of Aden, and Iran's interference has been forcefully checked, the end to Yemen's bloody quagmire appears nowhere in sight. The Houthis remain a competent fighting force, backed by Saleh, the former

president and Riyadh's one-time ally. Saudi Arabia's insistence on using airpower to back a myriad of poorly trained forces on the ground has led to a virtual stalemate with no clear winner likely to emerge in the near future.<sup>104</sup> Instead, accusations of Saudi Arabia's disregard for international humanitarian law, poor targeting, and rules of engagement that have led to large numbers of civilian casualties have proven highly damaging for Riyadh and its Gulf partners.<sup>105</sup> In London and Washington, some lawmakers, concerned that Saudi-purchased weapons are being used in civilian areas without requisite oversight, are advocating a total reconsideration of the future defense sales relationship with the Gulf, and especially Saudi Arabia.<sup>106</sup> So far this has not happened, and both the United Kingdom and the United States are likely to maintain their relationships with the Gulf countries well into the coming years.<sup>107</sup> But the scale of the human tragedy in Yemen and the inability of the Saudi-led coalition to bring the war to a conclusion has been embarrassing for Western governments,<sup>108</sup> and has further pulled apart the rift between Western nations and Saudi Arabia.

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Without a clear political track in sight, the war in Yemen is a bleeding sore the Gulf states simply do not know how to treat. While both the Yemen war and the 2011 intervention in Bahrain were largely successful in deterring any full scale military deployment by Iran, they have greatly undermined Saudi power projection in the wider region, and left Riyadh with little in the way of good options to expand its influence at Iran's expense. An end to the war that leaves Houthi militias roaming the country would be an ignominious defeat for Riyadh, but to continue an increasingly futile military operation risks alienating world opinion and draining Saudi resources at a time when money is tight, and Syria still requires Saudi attention and leadership.

Furthermore, the shift of attention away from fighting the Islamic State in early 2015, at a time in which Western powers viewed it as the key threat in the region, has left a bad taste in the mouth both in the West and in the Gulf. In February 2016, Riyadh offered to send ground troops to fight the Islamic State, but this was never taken up by the anti-Islamic State coalition, with American special envoy Brett McGurk reiterating that the "focus on empowering local actors to liberate their own territory [is] the most sustainable strategy for defeating ISIL, and will remain our fundamental approach."<sup>109</sup> The Gulf states have contributed to the fight against the Islamic State in other ways: the Emirates and Qatar have coordinated closely with the West on counter-extremist narratives in the region,<sup>110</sup> while Bahrain and Qatar have also sent advisers to work in the Global Communications Cell of the Counter-ISIL Task Force in Great Britain.

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Domestically, Saudi Arabia has shown little mercy for those who profess support for the group. In July 2015, the Saudis rounded up 431 of their own nationals in a series of anti-terror sweeps,<sup>111</sup> following Islamic State attacks on Shia mosques in the Eastern Province, and in Kuwait. But the core problem largely remains: Gulf States view the continued demands by the West to divert resources to the battle against the Islamic State as futile while the threat of Iran and its proxy groups is not dealt with. For Riyadh and its Gulf partners, to ignore Iran is to ignore the root cause of Sunni disaffection across the region, and thereby maintain the conditions necessary for groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to exist.

To this end it appears there is little room for accommodation between the position of Western states and their Gulf partners. Attempts by the United Kingdom to address the issue of Iran's regional activity have been welcomed by the Gulf states,<sup>112</sup> who now look toward the administration of the new American president, Donald Trump, for similar reassurance that Iran's regional meddling will be contained. But Western rhetoric, if not matched with action, will do little to assuage the fears that have been building over the past decade. At the time of writing it does not appear that either the United Kingdom or the United States possess the necessary resources or political will to contain Iranian influence in the way the Gulf states would like.

## Security without the West

Mindful of this, Saudi Arabia has tried, albeit with limited success, to isolate Iran in other ways. In December 2015, Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the formation of the so-called Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, a coalition of thirty-four states stretching from sub-Saharan Africa to Malaysia. Iran and Iraq were conspicuous in their absence, and it was clear from the outset the project sought to form a global alliance to contain Iran's regional and global ambitions, particularly in the Islamic world. It appears an unwieldy grouping of states, hastily cobbled together with no genuine nexus for joint security thinking. But rather than building an Islamic NATO, Saudi Arabia wanted to signal to Iran its intent. As one Saudi diplomat put it, "the goal is not to invade Iran, or produce some sort of military alliance, but to build a framework over time that works to constrain Iran's ambitions across the globe."<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Saudi Arabia has also sought to more closely integrate its security needs with its Gulf brethren. Following stalled attempts at forming a Gulf Union in 2012, the idea is once again being floated by Gulf thinkers, and Riyadh has expended considerable political capital to press the Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait into forging a closer bond. Such a union's possible power and reach remain uncertain, but it is clear that Saudi Arabia is seeking political assurances from its closest neighbors as the perceived Iranian threat and its associated tensions continue to build. Again, it is notable that Oman has been omitted from Riyadh's plans, and although the Sultanate has decided to join the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, it has still largely refrained from seeking closer political integration with Saudi

Arabia. To add substance to the political agreements, the Saudis have engaged in a series of large-scale military exercises.<sup>114</sup> Such exercises are deliberate shows of force from Riyadh designed to impress upon Iran's leadership that Saudi Arabia can and will use force to defend its interests. But while Saudi bicep-flexing might be able to contain Iranian activity in the Gulf, it has not translated into any form of strategy to roll back Iranian influence from the Mashreq at large, and it is here that Riyadh is still largely short on answers.

## Conclusion

The Arab uprisings were never going to produce a world that the Gulf states were comfortable with. Fearful of change to the status quo, and terrified that this change might mean the end for the dynastic monarchies in the Gulf, these states have played a bizarrely disjointed role in attempting to secure their interests over the past five years. That tiny Qatar quickly and forcibly mobilized its wealth to speed up change across the region was remarkably uncharacteristic of the behavior of Gulf states. Quite apart from overplaying its hand and spiking the anger of Arab populations in the countries in which it tried to assert its interests, Qatar's activism sparked the ire of the Emirates and in many ways accelerated the awakening of the Saudi juggernaut to squash the potential for instability—in the form of rival regional ideologies—from taking root in the Gulf. Unsure of anybody or anything that upset the regional status quo, Saudi Arabia was all but destined to have problems with a neighbor who set about trying to engineer regional change—especially without first consulting Saudi Arabia, which considers itself the first among equals in the GCC. King Abdullah's desire for a united GCC ended Qatar's rise almost as quickly as it had begun, but really should be seen as Saudi Arabia first getting its own house in order before setting out to engineer regional politics in its favor. Indeed, the aggressive posture of Saudi Arabia to which the region has now become accustomed required three factors to bring it to life. First, the widespread unrest of the Arab uprisings; second, the hyperactivity of Qatar; and last (and most importantly), the United States and its general policy of de-escalation with Iran.

It is this last point that has been most galling for the Gulf. Entrenched distrust and fear of Iran and its expansionist proselytizing was always tempered by the presence of overwhelming American power in the Middle East, combined with a willingness to use that power to contain Iran if necessary. The combined factors of regional destabilization, and the weakening of states—particularly those with significant or majority Shia populations such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen—presented a headache to which the Gulf states possessed no answer outside of looking to external powers for assistance. But, chastened by a failure of military intervention in Libya, the Gulf's traditional allies have only hesitantly aligned with Gulf interests, preferring instead to reduce military remits to fighting al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and playing only a supporting role to the Gulf states in containing Iranian activities, particularly at the subnational level. The simple truth is that the forces aligned to Iran's interests—the Shia militias in Iraq and Syria fighting the Islamic State

and rebel groups, and the presence of Russian forces in Syria backing Assad—have expended more resources and manpower to shape the region in a manner that suits Tehran, than those aligned toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have spent on their allies and benefactors. Riyadh’s frustration at this dynamic has triggered its activism, and has accelerated its rise to hegemony in the GCC on regional security matters.

But Riyadh’s aggression has produced little of worth. A costly war in Yemen has diverted dwindling Gulf resources to a conflict that is crucial to Saudi stability, but almost no one else’s. Saudi activism has not pulled Iraq away from Tehran’s orbit, nor has it been able to comprehensively produce a result in Syria that prevents Iran from having a permanent foothold in the country. And in Lebanon, Hezbollah’s power is now largely unchecked. Additionally, rifts with traditional partners in the West have widened even further over competing regional priorities, and the relatively poor performance of coalition airpower in Yemen. As a result, the Middle East remains a threatening environment for the Gulf and there is no obvious way that Iran’s influence can be rolled back.

With unrest in Bahrain having been largely contained, there is little that can internally threaten the Gulf, aside from Islamic State sympathizers committing isolated acts of violence. And so the Gulf states can feel relatively happy that their ruling systems have remained largely intact since the Arab uprisings. Indeed, the long-term security of the Gulf is more or less assured: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France will not leave any time soon, and Iran’s ambitions across the Gulf are largely contained. But the Gulf’s rulers will have to come to terms with the fact that they are but one of a series of players involved in Middle Eastern affairs, a result of American retrenchment from the region, Russian assertiveness and Iran’s reentry into the world. It is an uncomfortable reality, but ultimately not an existential threat. The decades ahead are likely to be unhappy but safe.

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## About This Project

This policy report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

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## Michael Stephens, Contributor

Michael Stephens is research fellow for Middle East studies and head of the Royal United Services Institute (Qatar).

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