



REPORT ARAB REGIONAL SECURITY

# Friends with Benefits

The Gulf States and the Perpetual Quest for Alliances

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There is never a dull moment in the politics and international relations of the Arab Gulf monarchies. Among states that half a century ago had yet to connect their major towns with paved roads, electricity, and water, one state now has a space program aiming for Mars (the United Arab Emirates) and another is the richest state on earth (Qatar, as measured in gross domestic product per capita). Once a backwater of global affairs, the Gulf region is now squarely at its center.

Amid this transformation, one trend has remained constant: the frenetic, often disjointed search for security partnerships and alliances. For most of the past two hundred years, the once proto- and now consolidated states of the Arabian Peninsula sought and retained an unusual dependence on foreign powers. Forming alliances and alignments has been part and parcel of the core statecraft of these countries and their primary mechanism for ensuring their survival, stability, and security. As a result, the Gulf region is now arguably the most internationalized security arena in the world.

In recent decades, near-absolute reliance on the United States was the central security pillar of the Gulf states, alongside nominal but ultimately cosmetic efforts to diversify relationships and to build up indigenous defense capabilities. There are signs that such dependence is evolving, driven both by uncertainty about the United States' commitment and by the Gulf states' own calculations. Beginning with the administration of President George W. Bush, growing more pronounced during that of Barack Obama, and in full gear since Donald Trump became president, many Gulf leaders appear to sense that the Pax Americana is receding, that its benefits are no longer commensurate with their expectations and the stakes, and that such dependence comes with downsides that require strategic mitigation. Although the United States will likely remain the region's central security actor in the near future, the end of its dominance is now plausible and imaginable for the first time in generations.

The fragmentation of the Middle East geopolitical landscape since 2003 and more so since the Arab uprisings of 2011 has revealed the limitations of the Gulf states' near total reliance on the United States. Exhausted by its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and having long been less reliant on Middle Eastern oil than it once was, the United States sought to extricate itself from regional conflict (notably with Iran) and became less willing to advance the regional interests of its Gulf allies. In response, the Gulf monarchies demonstrated unprecedented if disunited and possibly unsustainable assertiveness in the military and foreign policy realms. Some efforts were aligned with American policy, but most contradicted American preferences. Saudi and Emirati support for the 2013 military coup in Egypt and the two countries' 2015 intervention in Yemen, Qatar's vigorous support for political Islamism regionwide, and near-universal skepticism toward the U.S.-led Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—all signaled divergence. Ambitious projects, such as the Gulf Union, were announced, and commitments toward greater defense buildups and regional defense integration have been made. Nevertheless, these lofty ambitions remain purely

aspirational. Structural and political obstacles to Gulf collective security are formidable, as evidenced by the debilitating crisis that erupted between Qatar and its three closest neighbors—Bahrain, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia—in June 2017.

Also notable since 2011 is the greater, more sustained outreach to other potential security partners. Talk of new security relationships, while always there, picked up in intensity and seriousness across the Gulf since 2011. Always alert to shifts in global power, the Gulf states increasingly have looked toward countries that are willing to project power and provide a promise of security. The resurgence of Russia on the Middle Eastern scene in recent years has, for example, intensified Gulf outreach to Moscow. The much-anticipated strategic arrival of China further shapes the thinking in Gulf capitals, although the form of this putative “arrival” is still deeply uncertain.

The Gulf reliance on external security providers should be critically examined. Although external alignments are perceived to have safeguarded the immediate security of the Gulf states, the region has nevertheless seen three major interstate conflicts in the past thirty years. A stable, inclusive security architecture remains elusive. Such dependence arguably has hindered the development of the monarchies’ own self-help and self-defense abilities. It also may well have hardened Gulf positions toward their regional foes, instead of encouraging the articulation of more realistic policies.

There are other downsides to reliance on external actors for Gulf security. The Arab Gulf states often enter arrangements with competing external powers or compete against each other for the attention of their respective security providers. This behavior has led to unnecessarily complex military procurement of different systems from different states. Though this approach may allow the monarchies to invest in different international relations, it is an expensive way to secure relationships and it adds unnecessary and deeply problematic technical and training complications. Additionally, Gulf leaders often place undue expectations on these partnerships, setting themselves up for disappointments and tense relations. The Gulf states’ belief that they have the backing of powerful states may also have engendered less ameliatory, more strident policies. For example, it is doubtful whether Qatar would have been as keen to deploy the majority of its operational fast-jets three thousand kilometers away to Libya, as it did in 2011, had it not been so deeply secured in its U.S. military cocoon. Conversely and perversely, the very search for security has pitted Gulf states against each other and magnified their differences.

### **Order from Ashes**

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## The Context of Security Dependence

At the heart of the Gulf states' search for external partners is an acute awareness of their own vulnerability. They perceive myriad interlinked threats that must be defused or countered all around their Middle Eastern neighborhood. These threats are hybrid—combining strategic, ideational, political, and security dimensions—and present varying degrees of potency.

Bahrain, the Emirates, Oman, and Qatar obtained independence only in 1971. As young states facing the challenges of building institutions and developing their economies, often from scratch, they had to operate in a context of larger, more capable, and more established rivals with claims to regional leadership. In particular, Iran became a challenge following the overthrow of the shah in 1979 and its subsequent efforts to export its revolution to neighboring states, as did Iraq until the U.S.-led war to reverse the 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Intramonarchy tensions also have long been evident, often stemming from fears about Saudi Arabia's dominance—real or imaginary—of the Arabian Peninsula.

Indeed, size, geography, history, demography, and institutionalization have long favored rivals surrounding the smaller Gulf monarchies. Iran to the east, Iraq to the north, and Egypt to the west have long been or aspired to be regional hegemonies; they dwarf the smaller Gulf states in particular in almost every metric. The Gulf states only really came of age and were able to exert regional influence with the onset of hydrocarbon-based wealth in the latter half of the twentieth century and the rapid development and embrace of globalization that followed.

These fundamental imbalances have compelled the Gulf states to seek partners and allies willing to bolster their external security requirements.

Indeed, alliances and alignments have been central to the rise and the politics of the states of the Gulf. Glenn Snyder has defined alliances as “*formal associations of states for the use (or nonuse) of military force, in specific circumstances, against states outside their own membership* [italics in original].... Alliances are associations with a military or security purpose.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, alignments are “the broader and more fundamental term.... defined as expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions.... In general they stem from the perceived interests, capabilities, and observed behavior patterns of other states.... They may only be vague estimates of likelihood rather than certainties.”<sup>2</sup>

A state typically sees alliances and alignments as a way to secure itself by developing relations with other states when

faced with a threat. This development of relations can take the form of “balancing” or “bandwagoning.” To balance or engage in balance of power is to ally or align with states that are, broadly speaking, friendly—or at least not overtly antagonistic. To bandwagon is to ally or align with states that are, broadly speaking, hostile; the theory being that a state submits willingly into some client-patron relationship as a way of staving off a worse fate. History shows that balancing is more common than bandwagoning.<sup>3</sup> This is a result of attraction and repulsion. States ideally do not look to bandwagon, as they naturally prefer to ally or align with states with which they share “ideological solidarity.”<sup>4</sup> States with similar principles can defend them together, and may be less fearful of states that have similar traits. Smaller states may enhance their legitimacy working with a similar but larger state, and ideological motivations may promote closeness.<sup>5</sup>

The real-world practice of these strategies has been a pattern of the politics of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>6</sup> The history of Qatar since the mid- to late eighteenth century illustrates this pattern well. Two tribal groups, the al-Khalifah and the al-Jalahima, developed the village of Zubarah on the Qatari peninsula into a bustling trading port.<sup>7</sup> Soon, regional powers coveted Zubarah’s wealth. Forces from the Sultan of Muscat, Persian proxies on the island of Bahrain, and emerging Wahhabi forces from deep inside the Arabian Peninsula jostled and fought for control of Zubarah.<sup>8</sup> The al-Khalifah were relatively weak and thus frantically sought alignments—not formal, codified, written, signed alliances—with the Sultan of Muscat against the Wahhabis one year, and then with the Wahhabis against the Sultan of Muscat the next, and so on.<sup>9</sup> However temporary, such alignments were their only real means of security. Local forces like the al-Khalifah employed both balancing and bandwagoning as they sought as much autonomy as possible in a hostile region.

When the Ottomans became a regional force on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula in the mid-nineteenth century, they too were involved in this game. Different political powers on the Peninsula sporadically sought out relations with the Ottomans, and thus de facto and de jure protection against other regional depredations. This relationship was a more explicit alliance and is better seen as balancing. Qatar’s leading sheikhs signed formal alliance agreements with the Sublime Porte, as the Ottoman government was also known. Though relations with the Ottoman Empire ebbed and flowed, as onerous as the Ottomans were at times they seldom were the depredatory forces of the bandwagoning literature.<sup>10</sup>

The entrance of the British added another player to whom local statelets could appeal for security through treaties and alliances.<sup>11</sup> Thus began strategic hedging in the Gulf, whereby local actors constantly sought to diversify relations and find better security arrangements. Indeed, local forces in Qatar eagerly sought to balance one external power against another in the pursuit of as much security and autonomy of action as possible. The statelets that would later become Bahrain, the Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman displayed a similar pattern of behavior, signing on to a range of alliance treaties with the British from the 1820s onward.<sup>12</sup> Qatar signed on to a British alliance treaty in 1916.

Kuwait secured its independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. Soon after, with Iraq's president Abd al-Karim Qasim threatening to invade, British troops returned to provide a deterrent force, fulfilling the alliance's existing requirements.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Bahrain, the Emirates, Oman, and Qatar obtained their independence a decade later, as the United Kingdom pulled back from its alliances in the Gulf. Britain did nothing when Iran took control of three disputed islands days before the official handover of power to the Emirates, revealing the vulnerability of the new Gulf states.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1970s the newly minted states concentrated on consolidation and national development. Qatar sought a close alignment with Saudi Arabia, genuflecting to the larger state as part of a ploy for de facto security protection. The Emirates were preoccupied with the difficult task of unifying the state: the seven constituent federal elements did not easily surrender power or autonomy, and it took two decades for the military to unify and for Abu Dhabi to become the official capital.<sup>15</sup>

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, continued the loose alignment with the United States that it had started in the 1940s. The House of Saud was perennially and deeply concerned with not showing too much coordination or linkage with the United States for fear of domestic or international critique, including over American support for Israel. It would take a profound threat to overcome this core reticence.

## The Search for Security since 1979

It was only at the very end of the 1970s that the Gulf states had to rethink their security for the first time. Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iranian-Arab relations were relatively equitable in spite of Iran's significant shadow over the region. However, the youthful, rebellious Shia theocracy that overthrew the shah actively sought to export its revolution. Later in the same year, Saudi Arabia suffered a traumatizing terrorist attack when dozens of religious extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca and held it for nearly two weeks, striking at the core of the kingdom's legitimacy as the self-styled guardian of Islam.<sup>16</sup> The Russian intervention in Afghanistan in December of that year also raised concerns about Communist expansion toward the Middle East. The start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 further ratcheted up tensions, with many observers believing that the victor in that conflict would emerge as the regional hegemon.

These events increased the temperature in the Gulf. The monarchies, especially the smaller ones, saw grave dangers to the region and their own security. Their answer was to turn toward each other and form an alliance called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Technically, this was not a military or even a security alliance. The founding charter explicitly avoided such language. Rather, it was meant to be an economically rooted alliance between the six monarchies to encourage cooperation and coordination. Nevertheless, the implicit deep security concerns helped bring the monarchies together in Abu Dhabi in 1981. The GCC added an explicitly military component to the alliance with the

founding of the “Peninsula Shield” defense forces in 1984. However, this military venture has never really been more than a rhetorical device, as opposed to a united NATO-like force capable of deploying in unison.<sup>17</sup> Even when the Shield was deployed into Bahrain in 2011, it amounted to a deployment of Saudi troops and armor and some Emirati police—hardly a multinational military coalition.

More important, the Gulf states found U.S. protection. In early 1980, faced with regional upheaval, the administration of President Jimmy Carter issued an ambitious concept that would later come to be known as the Carter Doctrine, which



PHOTOGRAPH OF MIDDLE EAST FROM A DESKTOP GLOBE.

stated: “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>18</sup> Although the doctrine primarily was meant to deter Soviet dominance, it also served to prevent the rise of any potential regional hegemon—which met Gulf expectations, given Iraqi and Iranian ambitions. In later years, the value of such a cover became clear as the United States protected maritime traffic and oil tankers from Iranian attacks. This demonstration of the United States’ capability to actively defend Gulf interests foreshadowed the subsequent American role in the region.

Iraq’s shattering 1990 invasion of Kuwait made it vital to upgrade the alignment structure of the Gulf. The Iraqi invasion crossed a fear threshold for the Gulf states: a large regional state had invaded one of their own, they had no capacity to repel the invaders, and there was no realistic combination of Arab states that could do so. The speedy and decisive diplomatic and military performance of the U.S.-led coalition, and the absence of any significant Soviet role, crowned the United States as the Gulf’s ultimate ally. Previously, the smaller Gulf monarchies (ironically, led by Kuwait) had been lukewarm at best about closer relations with the United States.<sup>19</sup> Gulf rulers feared that U.S. support for Israel would rile

their domestic audiences. In spite of the extensive and evergrowing U.S.-Saudi military cooperation throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—including the construction of huge military bases without which Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm would have been exponentially more difficult—this realignment was conducted with conspicuous quiet.

However uneasy and unpopular, relations with the United States (and other Western allies like Britain and France) became critical in the face of a near-existential regional security threat. The Gulf states signed a range of agreements to create or expand existing U.S. military bases across the region. Though there is no open-source evidence that these agreements coalesced into a typical alliance that included guarantees of protection, the exponentially increased U.S. presence across the monarchies from 1990 onward arguably amounted to a tripwire, or a de facto guarantee of protection from external aggression. With Washington focused on Arab-Israeli peacemaking and on the dual containment of Iraq and Iran, the Gulf states entered a unique period of peace. In exchange for bestowing Arab legitimacy and cover to U.S. policy in the region, the Gulf states obtained their longed-for security cover. Yet doing so slowed their own strategic, military, and diplomatic development. Indeed, reliance on the United States throughout the 1990s encouraged complacency and free-riding.

## Adapting to the Transformation of the Strategic Landscape

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 upended the regional balance. Despite their antipathy for Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Gulf monarchies repeatedly warned the United States that removing him would give Iran a profound strategic boost. Ignoring these warnings, the U.S. removed the Iraqi ruler, and Iraq fell swiftly and predictably to Iranian influence. Questions about the Americans' wisdom and competence, as well as the consequences of turmoil in Iraq, forced new thinking in Gulf capitals about their security dependence on the United States.

This rethinking coincided with the economic ascent of the Gulf states. Rising oil prices in the early years of the new century, along with large hydrocarbon reserves, allowed the Gulf states to embark on ambitious national development projects and massive investments abroad. They became players in the global economic system just as emerging markets began to grow: within a decade, Gulf city-states became global hubs and centers of finance and trade for African, Middle Eastern, and South and East Asian economies. New ties and broadening networks suggested tantalizing new political and security prospects. As a result, the Gulf states have, since 2003, frenetically worked to diversify their relationships, courting various countries in the hope of adding them to their security portfolios.

Key to each Gulf state's sense of security is the feeling of being embedded in global economic and political networks. By embracing globalization and appearing to be good global citizens that abided by international rules and norms, the Gulf

states expect security and political returns that would in theory be denied to their rivals, especially to a revisionist, rules-breaking power such as Iran. The more that partners are vested in the stability and economic success of the Gulf states,



GULF LEADERS GATHER AT THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL'S 35TH SUMMIT MEETING IN QATAR IN 2014.

the greater the Gulf states' sense of security and leverage. Such a grand strategy requires branding and outreach not just to governments but increasingly to new audiences.<sup>20</sup>

The resulting interdependencies and entanglements amount to significant tangible and intangible security benefits. Examples of the former include defense agreements, arms sales, and military basing, whereas the latter include acceptance in the global governance system and greater international visibility. The monarchies actively sought to boost the bases of their alliances. These interactions may have started as transactional and bilateral in nature, but the thicker they become, the greater the overall sense of security. What makes many of these alliances even more important and beneficial is that, at least in theory, they also serve the Gulf states' economic development goals. By investing abroad through their investment vehicles and sovereign funds, by opening up their markets, by becoming logistical hubs, and by welcoming expatriate talent as well as lowskilled workers, the Gulf states have become players in the global economic system and valued partners of both major and developing economies.<sup>21</sup> The presence of millions of expatriates as well as tens of billions of dollars as investments are seen as a tripwire for international attention and possibly protection in case of a local or regional conflict. Indeed, to take the example of hydrocarbon supply, states like China, India, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom need a stable Gulf in order to keep their lights on, and thus are also dependent on the U.S. military role in the region.

## The Gulf Security Onion

The Gulf states see their security as a series of layered relationships. Some relationships are existential, others are important, and still others are useful, convenient, or simply worth limited cost and attention. This hierarchy is essential to the states' own allocation of attention and resources. The typology offered below strives to clarify the broad segmentation of states in the international relations of the Gulf states.

At the center of this onion-like structure sits the United States, their indispensable and most capable ally. The dilemma comes from the fact that though the United States is irreplaceable as an ally, its wisdom, performance, politics, and orientation are the most questionable and taxing of all. Other relationships are expected to complement and supplement, not replace, the U.S. security cover.

The next layer comprises western powers, namely permanent Security Council members France and Britain, which are militarily capable (to a limited extent) and willing, as well as politically and commercially friendly. Indeed, France was invited in 2008 to open a military base in Abu Dhabi, and in later years the United Kingdom upgraded its naval facility in Bahrain and made it permanent. This layer also includes countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey, and other large Asian Muslim states that provide military capability and strategic depth, along with political cover and religious legitimacy. Typically, each of these states is particularly important to one or another Gulf monarchy; the Saudi-Pakistani relationship, for instance, is unusually close, as is the Turkish-Qatari one. Russia and China also sit in this layer: as powerful nations with Security Council seats, global ambitions, and military muscle, they occupy a special place in Gulf strategic thinking despite cultural and political distance. But from a Gulf perspective, they can be disruptors and rivals as much as security partners, impossible to avoid but difficult to integrate into their own strategies.

Then come a variety of countries that provide significant economic or industrial benefits—such as Germany and South Korea—as well as international standing and validation. These countries often provide utility along particularly narrow furrows. Thus, for example, for the Emirates, South Korea was the state ultimately chosen to provide the Gulf nation's civilian nuclear power capabilities. This joint venture ties the two states together closely but in a very narrow field of endeavor. However, aside from discrete military sales that are notable for their sheer rarity, Germany and South Korea are absent in the Gulf security arena, preferring to avoid its entanglements.

Beyond that layer lies an array of states that seek financial assistance or economic benefits in return for supporting the Gulf states in international forums. This quid pro quo broadly explains the success of Emirati diplomacy in winning the vote to host the United Nations International Renewable Energy Agency and to organize World Expo 2020, or Qatar's stunning victory to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Also within this layer are poor Arab, Asian, and African countries that seek Gulf investments, aid, and largesse in return for political support and legitimacy, frequently in an explicitly transactional manner.

Unsurprisingly, the Gulf states pursue security diversification individually, haphazardly, and often competitively. Most lack a clear idea of what they want or are ready to accept. Rather, they broadly engage with these states with decreasing fervor, attention, and interest, with the United States gaining the most attention and the other states following accordingly as they move outward from the inside of the onion.

One example of Gulf states' wandering strategic attention is their original enthusiasm at joining NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). In 2004, the Western military alliance proposed a menu of operational activities to increase the Gulf states' military capacity. Bahrain, the Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar joined the initiative, hoping that practical cooperation with NATO could evolve into a security commitment. Tellingly, Oman declined to join, out of concern that doing so would alienate Iran. Importantly, Saudi Arabia also gave NATO a cold shoulder, fearing that the ICI would compete with Gulf integration plans and erode its military predominance on the peninsula. However, NATO never intended to and never suggested that it would extend security guarantees to its Gulf partners, especially as they themselves failed to embrace collective security. Such mismatched expectations affected the level and quality of the Gulf states' engagement with NATO, turning the ICI into a lackluster initiative.

Also notable was the Gulf states' reaction to the 2008 proposal by then- U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton to extend a formal (possibly nuclear) umbrella to the Gulf states to address a major security concern: the possible development by Iran of a nuclear weapons capability. "We should be looking to create an umbrella of deterrence that goes much further than just Israel," she said in April 2008. "Of course I would make it clear to the Iranians that an attack would incur massive retaliation from the United States, but I would do the same with other countries in the region."<sup>22</sup> In 2009, as secretary of state, she elaborated: "We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment that, if the United States extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer because they won't be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can, once they have a nuclear weapon."<sup>23</sup> The proposal attracted limited support but also significant opposition in U.S. policy circles. It extended security guarantees that are usually offered to treaty allies rather than defense partners. Additionally, further formalizing the relationship and thus further tying the country's hands resonated poorly with the sense of general fatigue toward the Middle East that had grown inside the United States.<sup>24</sup>

In any case, the Gulf states showed little interest. In fact, instead of seeking the formalization of the security relationship, they feared that accepting an offer of a formal deterrent would acknowledge the inevitability of a nuclear-armed Iran. Additionally, the formal nature of the umbrella meant that the security relationship would gain greater public and U.S. congressional exposure, thus creating the potential for embarrassment. Although their failure to pursue the proposal amounted to a de facto rejection of it, they made no counterproposal.

Traditional concepts of brotherhood and solidarity within the Gulf still prevail, at least in theory, and the goal of regime security remains paramount in each Gulf state's calculations. Beyond that, however, the Gulf states have failed to develop clear concepts of cooperative or collective security that would make it easier for outside actors to envision their own role. Indeed, agreeing on the need for cooperative and collective security would compel the Gulf states to resolve competing territorial claims, reconcile political rivalries, and address other latent issues. In contrast, relying on an outside security guarantor allows them to sidestep and delay such moves and to adopt more active, hawkish regional stances. Saudi



PRESIDENT TRUMP MEETS WITH MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD, DEPUTY CROWN PRINCE OF SAUDI ARABIA, AND MEMBERS OF HIS DELEGATION, IN MARCH 2017 AT THE WHITE HOUSE. SOURCE: SHEALAH CRAIGHEAD/ FACEBOOK.

unsurprising, considering that all security behaviors in the Gulf hinge on an understanding that any form of security or

In the new century, the Gulf states began to separately articulate and pursue more ambitious foreign policies. Qatar sought to raise its regional profile across the region, mediating in Sudan and Lebanon and also supporting Islamist groups in many countries. The Emirates began taking part in Western interventions, notably in Afghanistan, to train its military and promote its anti-Islamist credentials—which also had the benefit of forging a conspicuously close military-to-military relationship with the United States. Saudi Arabia, although mindful of Iran's regional rise, has struggled to define and assert a regional role: in Iraq, it chose to ignore new post-Saddam Hussein realities; it led an effort to isolate Bashar al-Assad in Syria in 2005 but reversed its efforts in 2009; and it called for tough measures against Iran's nuclear program under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (president 2005–13) but quietly longed for the years of détente under the presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (president 1989–97) and Mohammad Khatami (president 1997–2005).

The sense of looming regional trouble was not enough for Saudi Arabia to convince or compel its Gulf counterparts to consolidate their policies and work toward security integration. As before, outsourcing the management of regional or global security issues (such as Iran's nuclear program) to the United States remained the preferred route.

## Adapting to U.S. Retrenchment under Obama

The dilemma of the Gulf states was exacerbated under the presidency of Barack Obama, fueling a more frantic yet ultimately unsatisfactory search for external security alternatives. The turbulence in U.S.-Gulf relations during these years

was the product of both structural and circumstantial factors. It led to unprecedented and at times brutal Gulf responses to American retrenchment, and fostered Gulf suspicions about American motives and the manner with which the United States pursued its regional policy. A fundamental tension affected U.S.-Gulf security relations: Gulf regimes increasingly saw regional and domestic threats to their security as fundamentally intertwined, whereas the Obama administration focused on a few discrete internationalized threats and sought to disentangle them, even if this meant ignoring or underplaying other conflicts. Obama was determined to extricate the United States from Middle Eastern wars and to avoid new entanglements there.<sup>25</sup>

From an official Gulf perspective, the Obama administration's response to the Arab uprisings, its prioritization of nuclear diplomacy with Iran, its dithering over the Syrian civil war, and its much-hyped pivot to Asia amounted to the sum of all their fears. Here was the United States acquiescing to Islamist-led revolutionary change in the region, jettisoning support for long-term allies like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, negotiating with (if not capitulating to) the perfidious Iranian regime, reneging on its own red lines over chemical weapons use in Syria, and ultimately planning for a future with a less strategically essential Gulf, convinced that more important arenas of international politics were emerging in East Asia. The United States then encouraged a peaceful political dialogue in Bahrain between the Sunni monarchy and the Shia-led opposition during the 2011 Arab uprisings.<sup>26</sup> For key Gulf states, this crossed a line: the United States either was willfully ignoring direct Iranian interference in a Gulf monarchy, or it so badly misunderstood the nature of the threat that it had become a near-liability as an ally.

Despite the perception that the United States was ignoring threats to the Gulf, in reality the defense posture of U.S. forces deployed across the Gulf did not change. If the "pivot to Asia" meant any cutbacks, they would come from Europe, not the Gulf, where U.S. bases were actually expanding. Nevertheless, with the Obama administration pandering less to Gulf allies rhetorically—preferring to call for dialogue as opposed to supporting more confrontational Gulf positions—the quality of relations between Gulf capitals and the White House shifted considerably. The disconnect between Gulf

expectations on regional security and U.S. frustration with Gulf policies polluted interactions, prompting unprecedented official and private criticism of Obama in the Gulf. The United States found itself at odds with one or more of the key Gulf states on almost every issue;<sup>27</sup> that Gulf states themselves were split on these very issues made things worse.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the Gulf states responded to both perceived U.S. retrenchment and regional turmoil by acting in ways that ignored U.S. advice and preferences, as with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates launching military operations in Yemen in 2015 and that even at times were against declared U.S. policy, as in Syria, particularly from 2012 to 2013 when Qatar and Saudi Arabia ramped up support for various Islamist factions.

In 2016, Obama elucidated his view of Middle East politics in a long interview in *The Atlantic*. “The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace,” he said.<sup>29</sup> He proceeded to call the Gulf states “free riders.” The Gulf reaction to this assessment was, in private, blistering. There was nothing “free” about their \$1 trillion of U.S. procurement over the decades and about their steady support for U.S. policy on Middle Eastern and global issues; crucially, the very notion that the U.S. president had acknowledged and then accepted Iran’s regional subversion was little short of horrifying. It retroactively validated all the Gulf concerns about the United States’ Middle East preferences and suggested that the United States could position itself as only a mediator in regional conflicts, rather than an unconditional ally. Such a U.S. policy, in their view, would help advance Iranian interests in the region by design, or by default.

As political relations between the key Gulf states and the United States deteriorated, however, defense relations remained strong. Both the Pentagon and the Gulf capitals see their seemingly one-dimensional defense diplomacy as relatively easy to conduct, and the default position in U.S.-Gulf relations when politics affect their ties. Accordingly, arms sales from the United States to the Gulf states during the Obama years hit record highs. Maritime security, missile defense, and other forms of defense cooperation were largely unaffected by political tensions. The United States also provided material, intelligence, and logistical support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen despite deep misgivings in the Obama White House. For some, this support was necessary mainly to placate Gulf allies still simmering because of the JCPOA. Nevertheless, this critical, niche support illustrated the centrality and indispensability of the United States in Gulf defense. The spike in defense spending also reflected a certain sense of “one last spending spree,” as the Gulf states sought to procure weapons and training in the expectation that, sooner rather than later, they might actually have to rely on themselves.

Otherwise, the Gulf states' response was to court even more aggressively others who might be able to balance changing U.S. positions. In 2015, the GCC invited French president François Hollande to attend their annual summit, the first



KING SALMAN GREETES THE PRESIDENT AND FIRST LADY. SOURCE: OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA/ FLICKR.

Bahrain.

Another—and for some, surprising—aspect of Gulf hedging was a rapprochement with Russia, even as Moscow pursued policies ostensibly at odds with Gulf interests. Moscow's determined support of Assad in Syria, its proximity to Tehran, and its vociferous condemnation of Saudi Arabia and Qatar for their alleged support for jihadist groups should have precluded any such overtures. But intra-Gulf divisions, the overriding priority to keep a global power on side, and discontent with the United States militated in favor of building ties with Moscow. Moreover, with a changeable U.S. relationship, the Gulf states simply had to keep their options open, which meant swallowing the bitter pill of Russia's antagonism in Syria.

Indeed, discussion of Russia as a potential ally intensified in key Gulf capitals starting in 2013. As a Gulf official confided in 2014 in reference to Russia's takeover of Crimea and support of Assad, "I don't like what Putin does, but I like how he does it."<sup>30</sup> Gulf political discussions frequently contrasted Obama's professorial, dithering, and detached methods with Vladimir Putin's purposeful, ruthless, committed approach to global politics. Overreacting to the U.S. failure to uphold its own red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013, the Gulf states began to deeply doubt the credibility and commitment of the United States to their own security. By standing fast with Assad and decisively intervening in

Syria in late 2015 as the United States stood down, Moscow demonstrated that it would fulfill, in the service of its allies, the role that the Gulf states believed the United States would no longer uphold. The Gulf states came to see the United States as outwitted and outrun by Russia over diplomacy related to Syria and Iran. Just as in the early 1990s, the Gulf states judged it necessary to prioritize increased U.S. interaction at the expense of potential domestic unhappiness, the states again prioritized the need to diversify security partners with Russia at the expense of their vehement disagreements over Syria.

## Conclusion: Gulf Hedging in the Trump Era

When Donald Trump acceded to the White House in January 2017, it seemed that Saudi and Emirati wishes had been met beyond their expectations. During the campaign, though Trump had condemned Saudi Arabia in abstract terms, he also voiced hawkish views on Iran and political Islamism, derided human rights-based policies, promised to ruthlessly fight “terrorism,” and disparaged the Obama administration’s alleged weakness. Such views aligned almost perfectly with Saudi and Emirati threat perceptions.<sup>31</sup> Once the initial shock of the Trump victory was absorbed, both countries went into high gear to court the new president. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates felt that America was back as a reliable ally, and spoke prominently of a new era of U.S.-Gulf relations. Trump’s preferences for transactional bilateralism and apparent nepotism reflected the basic Gulf modus operandi and seemed to work to the Gulf states’ benefit. Moreover, the composition of his senior team—including his secretaries of state and defense, men with decades of experience in the Gulf—guaranteed sympathy, access, and attention at the highest levels. Trump’s high-profile May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia, his first foreign visit as president, was seen as the culmination of an unprecedented U.S. alignment with Saudi and Emirati policy.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, Trump’s Russia-friendly attitude implied that Gulf hedging would meet little to no opposition from his administration. In previous years, the nature and depth of Gulf outreach to Russia and other powers was limited in part by the concern that it could create friction with traditional Western partners. With Trump in the White House, that barrier seemed to have been lifted: elevating the relationship with Moscow would not incur the feared costs. Indeed, although its efforts were short-lived, the Emirates attempted to broker discreet talks between Trump and Putin associates.<sup>33</sup>

Yet even as Saudi Arabia and the Emirates embraced Trump in unprecedented ways, they continued their sustained outreach to other powers. Who knew, after all, how long Trump would be in the White House? Moreover, in part, there was a realization in Gulf capitals that Trump’s incoherent worldview, unpredictability, and lack of competence would be

major hurdles to the realization of his vision. As elsewhere, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi acknowledged that the decline of American leadership and credibility worldwide would durably and negatively affect U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Second, as the 2017 Qatar crisis showed, there were powerful voices in the U.S. government that could constrain and steer U.S. policy away from radical shifts. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates led a boycott of and a vociferous attack on Qatar that put the United States in a bind.<sup>34</sup> Trump initially voiced his support for the isolation of Qatar, but his secretaries of state and defense contradicted him by advocating deescalation and dialogue. Even in the matter of the Iranian nuclear agreement—an Obama diplomatic achievement that Trump harshly denounced—resistance to Trump's desire to scrap it altogether has succeeded to date, notwithstanding Trump's own commitment not to certify Iran's compliance with the deal. Such dissonance showed the limits of Saudi and Emirati influence in Washington.

Finally and tellingly, despite announcing large weapons sales, the Trump administration has made no offer to further formalize the security relationship. Neither have the Gulf states asked to do so. This silence illustrates a structural obstacle to any upgrading of the relationship: the United States is already offering everything it could offer and that the Gulf states could accept.

For all these reasons, the Gulf states recognize that pursuing new strategic relationships may not bear immediate results. Nevertheless, they consider such preparations essential to position themselves for the day when U.S. power no longer suffices, or for when it wanes. As American retrenchment under Obama and disarray under Trump illustrate, a retreating United States adversely alters the regional balance of power for the Gulf states. It creates a vacuum that ambitious rivals such as Iran and eager global powers such as Russia seek to fill. To preserve its equities in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has had to strengthen ties with Russia, culminating in the first-ever visit by a Saudi monarch to Moscow in October 2017.

Otherwise, seemingly close relations established over many decades ultimately cannot deliver. In the 2015 intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia expected to leverage its Pakistani and Egyptian relations for troops that would lead or at least play a significant role in the intervention. Tens of billions of dollars of support to both these states, and persistent mutual rhetorical support, seemed to guarantee this outcome. But both states reneged on any meaningful support, providing a deep shock to the Saudi-led coalition and a bitter reminder that one can rent an alliance but not buy one.

Therefore, both the need to build redundancies in alliances and relations and an awareness of the changing geopolitical landscape explain why the Gulf states invest attention, effort, and resources into cultivating good ties with rising powers such as India and, most important, China. As Gulf states are keenly aware of and sensitive to shifts in global power, they therefore want to exploit much discussed Asian opportunities and align with Asian states where possible. This courtship, however, is complicated by preferences and constraints in Beijing and Delhi. Notwithstanding booming economic

relations and energy dependence, the national security establishments in these capitals so far remain unwilling to get entangled in Middle Eastern politics or provide the kind of security benefits that the Gulf states expect.

Such trade-first relationships do not fit the needs of the Gulf states. In recent times, they have come to demand considerably more from their partners, including attempts to leverage states into taking clear sides in regional disputes. As they became more active in the region, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have sought to translate political and financial investments into political cover and even material support for their own ventures. Yet in each case, such as in competition and conflict with Iran, Qatar, Syria, or Yemen, they failed to convince major non-Western powers to intervene on their behalf. In fact, China, India, and Russia have expressly signaled that they would not alter their relationships with Iran or take sides in regional politics. For years, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have attempted to entice these global powers to distance themselves from Iran, but it was the U.S.-driven combination of sanctions and joint nonproliferation efforts with other great powers—and not Gulf offers of arms purchases and discounted oil prices—that succeeded in isolating Tehran and putting the brakes on Iran's nuclear program.

For the Gulf states, Russia remains perhaps the most complex partner. Given its global assertiveness, military power, and ability to frustrate or facilitate in key places, it cannot be ignored. In fact, the Emirates now sees Russia as a key partner in places such as Libya and Egypt. Saudi Arabia has sought Russian acquiescence for its Yemen intervention and has uncomfortably acquiesced to Russia's role in Syria. At the same time, the economic and industrial benefits of a relationship with Russia remain limited, especially compared to what Western and Asian countries can offer. In October 2017, Saudi Arabia announced its intention to purchase the S-400 missile defense system from Russia. A day later, the United States approved a \$15 billion sale of the U.S. THAAD system, the most advanced missile defense system. These purchases are driven by tactical and strategic reasons: a need to plug a hole in the Saudi air defense panoply, with too many Scud missiles from Houthi forces hitting Saudi targets. It is also a way to ensure an ever-greater Russian role in Gulf politics.

Fundamentally, none of the Gulf states' strategic alternatives could fill their defense needs as well as or embrace their strategic outlook as much as the United States, regardless of who sits in the White House. No other country can provide a permanent and sizeable military and maritime presence designed to deter Iran, or offer such a comparable range of options and relationships. This conundrum was made plainly clear for Qatar in June 2017: its partnership with the United States proved critical in containing its dispute with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Yet it also exemplifies the importance of having multiple redundancies. Having the American secretaries of state and defense on side was critical, but so was support from the dozen or so important states around the world who are acutely dependent on Qatar and the Gulf's enduring stability.

For the Gulf states, diversifying or deepening alliances is as much a signal of displeasure to Washington as it is a matter of strategic hedging and economic necessity. From a Gulf perspective, the risk is upsetting the United States or, more perversely, of validating arguments made within the United States in favor of downgrading its commitment to its Gulf partners. Hedging must therefore be fine-tuned and constantly accompanied by outreach to Washington.

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