



US Secretary of State John Kerry sits with the foreign ministers of the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on 6 February 2015 in Munich.

New Developments in GCC Security Thinking *by Imad K. Harb*

As the only coherent and cohesive entente of states in the Arab world, the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is now seriously reevaluating its response to regional conflict and instability. Long gone are the days when it had the luxury of avoiding entanglements and trusting others to address festering problems. In the current state of affairs, GCC countries have discovered that they cannot rest idly or nonchalantly, but must be proactive, effective, and assertive—all characteristics of mature and responsible states.

Though Oman remains entrenched in a non-confrontational position, the other five GCC states have, to differing degrees, become more self-reliant and assertive in defense of their common interests domestically, around the Gulf, and in the wider region.

Several concerns have forced the five GCC states to adopt a more proactive and assertive posture, especially the regional activity of Iran and the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Iran the existential threat

Iran continues to be the GCC's greatest external challenge. From the question of Iran's nuclear ambitions to its immersion in Syria's civil war, Iraq's uneasy political order, Lebanon's dysfunctional politics, and Yemen's sectarian instability, the GCC views Iranian actions with suspicion and hostility.

But at a more essential level, it is the character of the Islamic Revolution and its ideology, as laid down by the founder of the Islamic Republic, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, that is the source of great trepidation. The revolution combines the Shia interpretation of Islamic politics and a resounding accusation of Gulf monarchies as corrupt with what the Gulf states view as an ever-continuing effort to foment rebellion and discord in the Middle East and the Islamic world. As long as there is revolution or a pretext of it in Iran, the five states' leaders will always feel threatened and will thus behave accordingly.¹

In trying to ameliorate their fears of Iran's policies over the last few years, the five GCC states have shown an interesting array of responses that suggested independence and firmness. Over the nuclear standoff, they took an unusually oppositional stance given their historical reliance on the United States for their security needs. As Syria imploded and Iran embraced its repressive regime, most GCC leaders vocally supported the opposition politically and militarily and led an unprecedented active policy of demanding regime departure.² And as Iraq veered ever so precipitously into a sectarian alliance with Iran, the states held their support and decided to stay away from Baghdad despite active coaxing by Washington to engage it.³

Yemen: The overdue affair

There are many examples of the GCC's new direction toward relying on its own forces to address nascent threats to peninsular and regional security. For example, several of the GCC states took part in the American-led international coalition to fight the so-called Islamic State. Additionally, the Saudi-led Operation 'Decisive Storm' sets a new precedent. No other regional nor international party was legitimately willing to or operationally capable of addressing what GCC states understood to be an ideological and strategic threat to their stability, peace and wellbeing. As the Houthis and loyalists to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh came close to overrunning the entire country and establishing a new state and administration, Saudi Arabia led a GCC-Arab coalition on an unprecedented, yet so far unfinished, military mission to restore Yemen's legitimate government and assure strategic supremacy.

But the Yemeni conflict has exposed some serious shortcomings in GCC responses that should impact how the organization reacts to future challenges. First, Saudi Arabia and other states seem to have let the Yemen conflict fester for far too long before intervening, making a simultaneously quick, decisive and acceptable outcome impossible. Second, the GCC showed less unanimity of purpose and policy than required by such an important challenge to regional security, as Oman sat on the sidelines and Kuwait provided tepid support. Operationally, there was, and remains, a large degree of arbitrariness in operations, exposing poor planning and rushed decision-making. It also has become even clearer that air power alone has limited utility, has caused unacceptable losses among civilians, has invited international criticism, and has made the deployment of ground troops and subsequent casualties unavoidable.⁴

II. Analysis

Syria: The bloodbath

Five years ago, no one in the GCC collective thought it was possible that cordial relations with the Syrian regime in Damascus would experience the kind of cathartic collapse that it has seen after the start of Syria's revolution in March 2011. Despite Bashar Al-Assad's close relations with Iran, his alleged complicity in the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri, and his disparaging of GCC leaders' manliness after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon,⁵ he remained an acceptable friend and ally to the GCC states. Saudi Arabia and its allies even allowed Al-Assad a few months in 2011 to peacefully address Syria's version of the Arab Spring.⁶ He instead resorted to violent repression against the country's Sunni majority that had naturally spearheaded the protests against his regime and thus forced the GCC to turn against him.

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Today, Saudi Arabia holds fast to the demand of ousting the Syrian president, American cautionary warnings and Russian and Iranian commitment to his survival notwithstanding. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken it upon themselves to arm the Syrian rebels, including Islamic jihadists, and to promote the opposition's demands in the international arena. In September, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir

floated the idea that military intervention in Syria was possible,⁷ to be followed by Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid Al-Attiyah repeating the same assertion.⁸ Everyone knows that this could all be posturing, but the mere mention of such a possibility is a novelty in itself, reflecting an unprecedented assertiveness and confidence that characterizes GCC actions nowadays.

Conclusion

GCC self-confidence and assertiveness are rather new policy determinants necessitated by the regional strategic environment in which the Gulf collective finds itself. As the Obama Administration preaches self-reliance and burden-sharing, and as the Gulf region and the Arab world experience an array of armed conflicts and regional instability, GCC states find themselves becoming more involved actors. But what the new era of state maturity and responsibility necessitates is a needed degree of modesty about possible achievements, a commitment to finishing missions, and, above all, more unity of purpose and action. The current state of affairs points to myriad threats and innumerable challenges and the GCC must be ready for the road ahead.

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¹ For the ideological underpinnings of this trepidation, see Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), passim.

² See, for example, "The Middle East After the Iran Nuclear Deal," Expert Roundup, Council on Foreign Relations, September 7, 2015.

³ Ilan Goldenberg and Melissa Dalton, "Bridging the Gulf: How to Fix U.S. Relations with the GCC," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 6 (November/December 2015).

⁴ For a comprehensive look, see Frank Gardner, "Yemen conflict: No end in sight, six months on," *BBC News*, September 25, 2015.

- ⁵ Criticizing Arab leaders for their stance regarding Israel's assault on Hezbollah and Lebanon, Al-Assad called them "half-men" interested in "half solutions" with Israel. Read his speech to the Journalists' Union on August 15, 2006, at http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=421:president-assad-journalists-union-speech-august-15-2006&catid=112&Itemid=496 [accessed 9 January 2016].
- ⁶ GCC states concentrated in 2011 on supporting efforts by the League of Arab States to broker ceasefires and a negotiated settlement between the Syrian regime and the opposition. But after the end of the year, GCC arms shipments increased to help offset the regime's advantage over the rebels. See Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Syrian Rebels get influx of arms with Gulf Neighbors' money, U.S. coordination," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012.
- ⁷ Julian Borger, "Saudi Arabia says there is 'no future' for Assad in Syria," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2015.
- ⁸ "Qatar says could intervene militarily in Syria but prefers political solution," *Reuters*, October 21, 2015.