

# Foreword

*by Kristian Coates Ulrichsen*

Foreign policies in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have changed profoundly since the 2011 Arab uprisings—the consensus and caution that was, for decades, a hallmark of foreign engagement has given way to a set of far more assertive policies in response to the regional turmoil. In their diverging responses to the Arab Spring, Gulf officials have indicated both a desire and a capacity to “go it alone” and act unilaterally, or, at best, as a loose regional bloc to secure their interests in post-regime change transition states. The result has been a muscular approach to foreign policymaking, with powerbrokers in Gulf states taking the lead in responding to the political, economic and regional security challenges triggered by the 2011 uprisings. However, such an approach has exposed deep divisions within the Gulf and has pushed the GCC dangerously close to institutional collapse.

The Gulf states’ interventionist approaches to foreign policy post-2011 did not emerge from a vacuum. Instead, it follows the mid-2000s and onwards rise of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar as active participants in regional and international politics. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha all increasingly matched their states’ growing diplomatic, economic and military capabilities with more expansive policy intent. Ruling elites in these states became more proactive in identifying, projecting and defending their national and regional interests, especially once the shock of the uprisings in North Africa subsided. This brought to the surface deep differences in approach to regional affairs, and, particularly, over the role of Islamist groups in the political process.

This intra-GCC split became very clear in the scope and scale of the Gulf states’ assistance to Egypt. Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other backed different sides in the post-Mubarak maelstrom of Egyptian politics, particularly after the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013. The Egyptian example highlighted how Gulf actors were far from impartial in choosing how and to whom to provide political and financial support. Assistance from the GCC states was linked indelibly to political currents rather than tied to technocratic outcomes, and it followed tangled pathways that saw interests line up differently with or against each other depending on the case. The visceral dispute between the UAE and Qatar illustrates how two outwardly very similar states can adopt near-diametrically opposed foreign policies, especially in Libya. Other examples of policy bifurcation include Qatari and Saudi patronage of different groups of Islamists in the early stages of the Syrian civil war, and the simmering tensions between Saudi- and Emirati-backed groups in the current Yemen conflict.

Two main factors explain the rapidly-growing assertiveness of the Gulf states’ foreign policies. First among them is the changing perceptions of the American role in the region. GCC policymakers expressed deep disquiet with the Obama administration’s regional approach, particularly its willingness in 2011 to accept the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt, who, like the Gulf leaders, was a longstanding US partner. In addition, the JCPOA P5 + 1 agreement—initially negotiated in secret and excluded Gulf leaders during the process—was further evidence that the US no longer “had its back.” For these reasons, GCC states began developing regional policies autonomously and without necessarily factoring in US interests into the equation.

Secondly, the emergence of a younger generation of leaders, particularly in Saudi Arabia, has had a major effect on the Gulf’s foreign policies. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud’s meteoric rise to power

in Saudi Arabia, along with the relationship he has built with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi, looks set to reconfigure the style and focus of Gulf foreign policymaking for years, if not decades, to come. The launch of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in March 2015 (which morphed into Operation Restoring Hope the following month) was an early indication of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's (led by Abu Dhabi) determination to roll back the perceived threats from Islamist and Iranian "meddling" in regional affairs. However, the two diplomatic spats with Qatar—first in 2014 and again in 2017—have greatly weakened the GCC and laid bare the disunity at the heart of an organization that for over three decades has provided a modicum of collective regional action. It is questionable whether the GCC can regain the trust of all six of its members after three of its member states have turned on a fourth twice in three years.

Meanwhile, US foreign policy in the era of President Donald J. Trump is expected to be just as volatile and unpredictable as his unexpected election victory was in November 2016. The personalized approach to policymaking among President Trump's inner circle recalls the Royal Courts in the Gulf states, but without the certainty that once a decision has been made it will be implemented. The US government has already appeared to follow inconsistent approaches during the Qatar standoff, with the White House seeming to contradict the State and Defense departments. This mixed-messaging has prevented the US from taking the lead in attempting to defuse the regional crisis, as it might have done in the past—instead Kuwait has stepped in and taken the lead role of regional mediator. And yet, the eventual successions in Kuwait and Oman will remove the last members of the "old guard" who built up the GCC after its creation in 1981. Successions in both countries will only add to the already-uncertain regional landscape facing the Gulf states.

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