Foreign Policy Trends in the GCC States

Featuring

H.E. Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani
Minister of Foreign Affairs
State of Qatar

H.E. Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi
Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Sultanate of Oman

H.E. Ambassador Michele Cervone d’Urso
Head of Delegation to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman & Qatar
European Union

Foreword by
Kristian Coates Ulrichsen
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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.

Dr. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen is a Research Fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House and an advisor to Gulf State Analytics in Washington, DC. He is the author of four books on the Gulf, including, most recently, The Gulf States in International Political Economy (2015) and The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking (2016). Dr. Coates Ulrichsen has edited a further three books on the region, the most recent being The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf, which was published by Hurst & Co in October 2017.
The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is in crisis. Now is certainly not its first experience in disunity, but today is perhaps its gravest—as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, along with regional power Egypt, seek to isolate Qatar from both the GCC's economic union and their vehemently anti-Islamist Arab security bloc. As such, analysis of trends in the foreign policies of the Gulf states is increasingly vital to unpack differences in threat perception, understand capacity in policy formulation and execution, find threads of interdependence and discover potential areas for cooperation.

As scholars and analysts of the Gulf, we have some tools to explain what drives the GCC states' foreign policies, as well as to assess how broader changes in international politics and the global economy might impact the region (and vice versa). The study of the Gulf continues to lend itself to layered analysis and “complex realism.” In addition, the youthful population’s demands intersect with limited state resources, especially as hydrocarbon revenue streams decline. The formulation of the Gulf states’ foreign policies must respond to pressures inside the state, but also to regional power reconfigurations—some countries are still reeling from the 2011 Arab uprisings.

At the theoretical level, there is some convergence in newer understandings of causal mechanisms at work in Gulf politics, and international relations in the Middle East more broadly. As we continue to explore the causal mechanisms motivating the 2011 Arab uprisings, and to examine their consequences, scholars are relying on explanations that cross and combine different levels of analysis. We want to understand the projection of power, and how that is manifested in forms of identity, ideology, finance and traditional military means. We also seek to understand politics of the Arab world and broader Middle East by recognizing the overlap and interplay of domestic, transnational and geopolitical factors. Furthermore, information warfare and cyberthreats represent powerful new facets of Gulf and international politics more broadly.

A recurrent theme in the analysis of the foreign policies of the Gulf, and the Middle East more broadly, is a return to focusing on state capacity—and the related efforts to understand the persistent weakness of state institutions and the external consequences of weak states. As the Gulf states ramp up their efforts to project military strength outwardly and domestic security within, new vulnerabilities are emerging. There are increasing demands on Gulf state capacity, both in service delivery to citizens and in the ability to absorb and diminish ideational- and identity-based threats to cohesion and stability. Gulf states, like most other countries, are permeable and susceptible to ideological influence, proxy battles and overreach in their aid and military expansionist efforts. Moreover, traditional efforts to balance regional powers are complicated by the demands to balance internal power struggles among domestic constituents and threats to order and elite interests.

One of the central characteristics of the Gulf states' foreign policies is its resistance to typology. How is it that states that are so similar in models of governance, as Sunni monarchies, might also have such different perceptions of ideological threats? As Gregory Gause has recently argued, traditional power balancing theory does not explain the failure of the monarchical Sunni Gulf states to present a new alliance to counter a rising Iran. Instead, we see the GCC states focusing on domestic securitization, the outward
projection of military power, and attempting to both cultivate and destroy non-state actors and ideological movements identified simultaneously as threats and tools of counterbalance. In short, the sometimes-destructive foreign policy ambitions of these states seem at odds with the identified need to produce a regional counterbalance to a rising Iran.

At the time-being, there is a shared sense of shifting priorities among the GCC states—and an emerging foreign policy led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with the support of Egypt and Jordan, to reshape traditional power centers of the Middle East. The fallout from the Arab Spring continues to create both opportunities and risks for the Gulf states, many of which seek to reconfigure their sources of ideological and material strength in the region. What may be missing are clear articulations of the Gulf states’ foreign policy objectives.

There is no better time to build alliances in the Gulf and the wider Middle East than now. The perception of a diminished US commitment to the region has emboldened Gulf states and created opportunities for regional partnerships. Alliances do not require coordinated foreign policies in lock-step, but they do require a measure of trust and the ability to identify key threats to mutual security and areas of mutual benefit—particularly in states with clear incentives to promote economic interdependence. Identifying weaknesses, particularly in governance and state capacity, can help build foreign policies that are achievable and sustainable. The GCC states do not lack vision, but articulating their foreign policies to a global audience has proven tricky. Likewise, analysis of the foreign policies of the GCC states requires some measure of nuance and attention to detail for each country, while benefiting from the deployment of theories and concepts in the wider international relations literature.

The articles and interviews in this issue seek to address a number of foreign policy trends in the GCC states, some of which include: the outward projection of both military and financial power in Yemen and the Horn of Africa; understanding Gulf approaches to refugee policy and methods of foreign aid distribution; and investigating sources of state capacity, especially in highly-centralized and personalistic governments.

These are just a sample of the many important questions, and potential areas of research, for scholars examining the region. There is strong demand for well-informed analysis of the Gulf, especially from a new generation of scholars and policy practitioners. I hope that this issue will encourage future scholarship and debate on the region.

Karen E. Young is a Senior Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and an Adjunct Faculty Member at George Washington University.
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The emergence of alternative forms of development cooperation has been gaining ground in recent years. The growing involvement of new actors, such as the BRICS group, Indonesia, Mexico, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, has brought increasing attention to new priorities, strategies and methods of development cooperation. Their actions are challenging the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) model of development and the way aid is both conceived and delivered. Among these new donors, Gulf countries present a specific “khaleeji mode” that focuses heavily on bilateral aid arrangements and is cautious of multilateral cooperation. This approach represents the Gulf states’ efforts to become soft power gateways of influence between the Global North and South.

Defining the khaleeji mode

The khaleeji mode is framed within a South-South development cooperation model, but distinct in some ways, because Gulf countries are not part of the Global South. Despite still-challenging inequality levels, their development status is generally higher. There are aspects and practices of the khaleeji mode that resemble those of the OECD-DAC donor model, including macro-level efforts to build a unified Gulf Development Fund. However, most other aspects reveal that the khaleeji mode of development cooperation is...
more in line with South-South cooperation approaches, which emphasize a partnership among equals for mutual benefit and the valorization of historical links and connections.

Most Gulf donor funds tend to go to countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA). However, Gulf donors are increasingly directing funds toward lower- and lower-middle income countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Central Asia. In terms of multilateral flows, development aid has increasingly been distributed through Gulf institutions, with Gulf multilaterals allocating nearly two-fifths of their assistance to Official Development Assistance (ODA)-eligible recipients, one-fourth of which specifically went to sub-Saharan African countries. It is unclear whether the Gulf donors’ expansion into sub-Saharan Africa is rooted in a fundamental shift in development priorities or whether this simply reflects the perceived opportunity to expand into new regions. The political and economic landscape in sub-Saharan Africa is certainly becoming more attractive and trustable for donor countries generally—there is a decreasing number of conflicts, high economic growth and frequent natural resource discoveries in the region.

As for the sectoral priorities that drive Gulf donors, they tend to also differ from those of DAC donors. Historically, Gulf donors have channeled aid more heavily toward infrastructure projects aimed at improving transportation, access to water and providing energy—similar to what China and fellow members of the BRICS group have been doing in sub-Saharan Africa. DAC donors instead tend to provide aid for service provision (education and healthcare), governance improvement (often via budget support) and debt relief (for economic stability). These differences are mostly explained by underlying strategy: Gulf development assistance has been consistently tied to technical cooperation projects, material goods and concessional loans, and a general interest in soft power enhancement. Conversely, DAC donors have tried to invest in democratic governance—through conditionality, tying aid to long-term development strategies in recipient countries. DAC donors have also focused on sustainable economic development and quality of life improvement that are measured through Western indicators such as the Human Development Index.

Measuring aid effectiveness

Several Gulf states do meet the United Nations target of allocating 0.7 percent of GDP to development assistance. But heavy reliance on oil revenues as a funding source for bilateral aid spending has led to some recent volatility in aid spending and called into question the sustainability of Gulf financial assistance. An important challenge to the effectiveness of Gulf aid is the lack of transparency, and two factors are crucial here. Firstly, inconsistent data reporting in the region has led to large gaps in annual aid statistics. While Gulf multilateral institutions typically provide comprehensive documentation of aid spending, bilateral donors have been less consistent. Bilateral Gulf donors do not generally report certain types of aid spending, such as debt relief, which hinders transparency.

Secondly, Gulf donors tend to make additional contributions above and beyond regular aid spending. Referred to as “political aid,” some Gulf donors supplement development aid spending with contributions distributed directly to ministries of finance in recipient countries. (A distinction should be made between “political aid” and politically-motivated “development aid.” The latter may be susceptible to the geopolitical interests of donor governments, but remains ultimately geared toward development-based initiatives; the former does not explicitly target enhancing “development” per se, but it is a political tool.) Moreover, charitable donations made by Gulf rulers have blurred the lines between public and private spending. It remains difficult to disentangle these types of donations from the state’s public finances—some of these “private” donations could indeed be financed from public revenues.
Despite the poor statistical reporting, there have been small recent improvements to the issue of transparency. In 2010, the UAE released its first whole-of-government report on its aid flows and associated activities, making it the first country outside of the DAC to report its aid activities in such detail. Similarly, Kuwait has provided data on its response to the Syrian refugee crisis. More recently, the establishment of the Gulf-funded Coordination Group (Coordination Secretariat of the Arab National and Regional Developmental Institutions, the Islamic Development Bank and the OPEC Fund for International Development) has created a new space to facilitate communication and cooperation among Gulf aid agencies. There is certainly potential for this forum to engage further on accountability and transparency.

Prospects for the khaleeji mode

As global power shifts eastward, Gulf states have demonstrated a greater willingness to take proactive steps to reshape their position within the international system. They have made concerted efforts to influence the institutional design of global governance frameworks, devised nuanced strategies to manage the impact of globalization processes, enhanced their visibility and voice on the international stage, and begun to separate both their hard and soft power from hydrocarbon stockpiles. The khaleeji mode of development assistance serves as an implicit recognition and a direct response to such changes in global power.

Crucially, the strength of the khaleeji model is its ability to be flexible and malleable. Because it is not tied to any conditionality in relation to governance, it enables Gulf countries to try new development approaches. Gulf development cooperation has therefore largely eschewed ideology, and has no allegiance to one particular strategy and far less ownership of the principles of South-South cooperation than other emerging economies. The Gulf states are able to use development cooperation as a geopolitical and economic tool to achieve their goals, and they differ from DAC countries in this context. But this “opportunistic” side of khaleeji aid is more interested in practical goals than in ideology.

One major drawback of the khaleeji mode is the limited regional integration of Gulf aid. The Arab Gulf Programme for Development (AGFUND) and the Coordination Group could counter this. Yet, there remains deep differences between Gulf countries in their practices and traditions of development cooperation. While some are historical donors, like the UAE and Kuwait, other countries like Qatar have very specific approaches to development cooperation.

The sheer variety of Gulf approaches to development cooperation together with the 2017 GCC diplomatic crisis is perhaps further proof that regional integration and a coordinated approach to aid are not going to be achieved in the short term. A homogeneous ODA strategy in the Gulf would help counter the dominance of the DAC model, projecting the khaleeji mode further on the international stage. It would also prove its originality in relation to the donor strategies of emerging economies. But, for now, the lack of a unified approach renders the khaleeji mode more a trend than a unified model.

Dr. Mohamed Evren Tok is Assistant Professor, College of Islamic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Doha; Dr. Cristina D’Alessandro is Senior Fellow, Center on Governance at the University of Ottawa.
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GCC Policies Toward the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and Yemen: Ally-Adversary Dilemmas

by Fred H. Lawson

Studies of the foreign policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries usually ignore important initiatives that have been undertaken with regard to the Bab al-Mandab region, an area encompassing the southern end of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and Yemen. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have become actively involved in this pivotal geopolitical space over the past decade, and their relations with one another exhibit a marked shift from mutual complementarity to reciprocal friction. Escalating rivalry and mistrust among these three governments can usefully be explained by what Glenn Snyder calls “the alliance security dilemma.”

Shift to sustained intervention

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have been drawn into Bab al-Mandab by three overlapping developments. First, the rise in world food prices that began in the 2000s incentivized GCC states to ramp up investment in agricultural land—Riyadh, Doha and Abu Dhabi all turned to Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda as prospective breadbaskets. Doha pushed matters furthest by proposing to construct a massive canal in central Sudan that would have siphoned off more than one percent of the Nile River’s total annual downstream flow to create additional farmland. This project elicited fierce opposition not only from Cairo,
but also Riyadh, and it contributed to the sudden crisis in Saudi-Qatari relations that erupted in March 2014.3

Second, these three states were drawn into the region to challenge Iran, which had forged close ties with Sudan during the late 1980s and with Eritrea and Djibouti after 2007.4 Beginning in late 2008, Iranian warships routinely called at the Eritrean port of Assab as part of the multinational campaign against Somalia-based pirates. Saudi officials charged that the Iranians took advantage of these stopovers to deliver arms and military materiel to be forwarded to the militant Ansar Allah (“Supporters of God”) movement in northern Yemen, commonly known as the Houthis. In November 2009, when Saudi Arabia deployed patrol boats along the Yemeni coast to block such shipments, Iranian commanders announced their intention to station a destroyer at the southern end of the Red Sea.5 Soon after, then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad traveled to Djibouti and concluded a half-dozen bilateral economic agreements.6

Qatar riposted against these Iranian advances by stepping in to broker a provisional agreement between Khartoum and the secessionists in Darfur.7 Doha subsequently mediated a ceasefire between Eritrea and Djibouti regarding contested territory, and, in June 2010, sent 200 troops to the Eritrea-Djibouti border to monitor the settlement.8 In early 2014, Riyadh’s counteroffensive against Tehran picked up momentum and Saudi officials abruptly suspended all of the kingdom’s financial transactions involving Sudan. The resultant economic shock prompted the government in Khartoum to shut down the main Iranian cultural center in the country.9 Contingents of the Saudi and UAE armed forces then took up positions in Djibouti. Following a violent altercation between UAE representatives and Djiboutian military officers in April 2015, the UAE expeditionary force relocated to Assab, pushing aside the Iranian navy and transforming the sleepy harbor into a combined deep-water port and tactical air base.10 UAE commanders also set up a training facility for the Somali armed forces and engaged in negotiations with the autonomous administration of Somaliland to obtain access to the Berbera port.11

Third, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE found themselves entangled in Bab al-Mandab as a result of the Yemen civil war. Successive attempts by Doha to broker an accord between Houthi fighters and President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi foundered,12 which persuaded Riyadh to adopt increasingly belligerent policies in an effort to restore order.13 Qatar nevertheless retained a substantial degree of influence in Yemeni politics, largely due to its connections with the Islamist Reform (al-Islah) group—a linkage that irritated both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and played a role in precipitating the March 2014 GCC diplomatic crisis.14

Some semblance of unity among the three GCC states characterized the start of the Saudi-led military offensive against the Houthis, which got underway in late March 2015.15 Warplanes from the Saudi, Qatari and Emirati air forces took part in the initial bombing raids, and warships from their navies patrolled the waters of Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. One-thousand Qatari troops backed by 200 armored vehicles deployed along Saudi Arabia’s southern border in April and May,16 and elite units of the UAE armed forces took the lead in pushing Houthi fighters out of Aden during June and July.17 Pro-government forces in the south were reinforced that August by the arrival of a UAE mechanized infantry brigade along with a battalion of Leclerc tanks.

Trilateral unity began to crumble during the winter of 2015-16. Qatar and the UAE had a falling out over al-Islah, with the UAE foreign minister blaming that movement’s reluctance to break completely with the Houthis because the latter retained control of the strategic city of Taiz.18 The success of the UAE’s ground
offensives tempted it to consider establishing a long-term presence in Aden and the extensive oil-producing lands of Hadramawt and Shabwah. UAE representatives conferred regularly with leaders of the separatist Southern Movement, and allowed checkpoints throughout Aden, ad-Dali’ and Lahij to display the old South Yemen flag. Prospects for the emergence of an autonomous southern zone improved markedly after UAE forces gained control of the port city of al-Mukalla in April 2016 and announced that they would no longer conduct offensive operations. Since then, UAE companies have invested substantial funds to improve infrastructure on Socotra Island to the east of al-Mukalla.

President Hadi responded to Abu Dhabi’s evident drift toward sponsoring southern autonomy by dismissing Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, who enjoyed close ties to the UAE, and refusing to renew Dubai-based DP World’s contract to manage Aden harbor. Emirati commanders retaliated by blocking President Hadi’s aircraft from landing at Aden, and Emirati diplomats treated him with disdain when he visited Abu Dhabi in April 2017 to try to patch things up. On the other hand, Saudi officials joined the Yemeni government in expressing deep misgivings when the UAE helped convene a General Congress of Hadramawt at the end of April. The meeting’s concluding document called for the establishment of an “independent province” in eastern Yemen, which provoked President Hadi to dismiss the governor of Aden and four ministers of state who had openly aligned themselves with the UAE. As the fissure dividing Riyadh from Abu Dhabi kept widening, Doha and its al-Islah allies acquired greater leverage in both internal and regional affairs.

**Understanding rifts within the GCC**

Notable divergences in the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE toward the Bab al-Mandab region reflect the dilemmas of alliance management when challenging a common adversary. Any state that faces a threatening or belligerent adversary can be expected to strengthen ties to its primary strategic partner, thereby diminishing the likelihood that the ally will abandon it. However, by augmenting its commitment to the alliance, the state ends up reducing its influence over its partner, and encourages the ally to carry out bold or provocative actions that may well entrap it in conflicts that it would prefer to avoid. In this way, Saudi Arabia’s increased commitment to the GCC alliance has enabled Qatar and the UAE to undertake diplomatic and military initiatives that effectively undermine (and at times run counter to) Saudi security interests.

Ally-adversary interactions become even harder to manage when two or more allies are involved. The presence of two strategic partners increases the chances that a state will get dragged into an unwanted conflict. Equally important, efforts to strengthen ties to one ally bring into question one’s commitment to the other, thereby giving the second partner an incentive to abandon the alliance. Which ally a state chooses to conciliate depends on how dependent it is on each one. In general, a highly-dependent state is more likely to be entrapped by its less dependant ally.

In the case of recent GCC relations, Riyadh finds itself heavily reliant on Abu Dhabi. The deepening rifts that Saudi Arabia had with both Qatar and the UAE put the kingdom at a growing disadvantage in its dealings with Tehran—and have forced Saudi policymakers to mollify one partner or the other. Unsurprisingly, Riyadh chose to rally alongside Abu Dhabi and demand in June 2017 that Doha sever its connections with the region’s diverse Muslim Brotherhood organizations. The recent replay of the March 2014 intra-GCC crisis lays the foundation for a possible reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemeni arena, much to the detriment of Saudi-Qatari relations.

Fred H. Lawson is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews.
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5. Lefebvre, “Iran in the Horn of Africa,” 129.


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29 Ibid., 471-472.

Understanding Oman’s Foreign Policy

by Leah Sherwood

As an absolute ruler, Sultan Qaboos (1970–present) is the dominant actor within the Omani state. Driving the Sultanate’s foreign policy orientation, Sultan Qaboos has been markedly consistent through both times of major regional upheaval and relative calm. At the core of this consistency has been the Sultan’s effort to promote unity (domestically and regionally) and policy independence. While these goals are partly the result of Oman adopting classic small state security strategies, these alone fail to fully explain Oman’s autonomous foreign policy. It is therefore necessary to appreciate the influence that Oman’s political history has had on its threat perceptions.

The historical lack of Omani unity and independence caused great insecurity for the Sultanate. From the beginning of Al Busaidi rule in 1749, successive Sultans essentially relied on Britain for protection against Imamate challenges to its authority. The Imamate is at least a thousand-year-old system of governance established by the Ibadi religious leaders of Oman. The Sultanate’s historical leitmotif for nearly two centuries centered upon Imamate revolts and dependence on British assistance. This created vulnerability, economic hardship and entrenched domestic divisions.

The foreign factor

Looking back, the period between Oman’s first Ibadi Imamate in 799 AD and Al Busaidi rule in 1749 was marked by persistent tribal conflict. Internal discord had long made Oman vulnerable to external inter-
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British influence in Oman began in 1798 with the first Treaty of Friendship. Signing it fed the Imamate’s rejections of the Sultan’s legitimacy to rule. In 1819, after years of conflict, Britain took responsibility for the Trucial Coast territory and disconnected it from the Sultanate of Oman. In 1861, the Canning Award also separated Muscat from Zanzibar, ensuring a subsequent economic collapse and dependence on British “payments” to govern its territory with effect. This ensured a dualistic Oman, which was institutionalized again in 1920 with the Treaty of Al-Sib. It was a British-brokered solution to the Sultanate-Imamate conflict that cut Oman in half by giving the Imamate interior greater autonomy.

The root conflict between the Sultanate and the Imamate was over the Imamate’s rejection of the Sultanate’s hereditary system—election by consensus is an Ibadi tradition. Muscat’s seaborne influence of trade and colonization competed with the Imamate’s tribal and Islamic influences, which also lent the conflict a philosophical dimension. The net effect was that the Sultanate remained economically weak, politically toothless and reliant on a foreign power for its regime security. This internal conflict created divisions that legally existed until the late 1950s.

Unquestionably, domestic insurgencies during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s in Al Buraimi, Jebel Al Akdar and Dhofar were modern manifestations of the historic divisions between the Imamate and the Sultanate. But Egyptian, Iraqi and Saudi support for these Imamate rebellions added a regional dimension that amplified these conflicts. The vulnerability of Oman’s divided domestic environment was further complicated by the addition of international factors, with the USSR and China perpetuating Muscat’s conflict by providing financial and materiel support for their own Cold War efforts. The historical lesson is that foreign interference amplified the country’s domestic divisions, which is why it must be avoided, and Oman’s independence is therefore integral to state stability.

Sultan Qaboos, the student of history

Sultan Qaboos’ emphasis on independence and unity can be seen in the Sultanate’s foreign policy outcomes. Oman’s behind-the-scenes mediation role in the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran was meant to minimize regional divisions, secure new economic opportunities and avoid dependence on the Gulf states by hedging. Moreover, Sultan Qaboos consistently treats contentious foreign policy issues separately to preserve political relationships and stresses good ties with all parties as a means of promoting harmony.

Muscat’s neutral stance on territorial disputes in the region are an illustration of the gains it acquires by adopting such an approach to foreign policy. Oman protects its political relations with the Gulf states while safeguarding the advantages of its bilateral ties with Iran. As well, Oman promotes its independence by hedging between Tehran and Riyadh to avoid either state imposing policy constraints on it. Muscat follows similar balancing strategies with its “neither East nor West” policy. Sultan Qaboos’ foreign policy stance is that the “enemy of my friend may still be my friend,” which attempts to use neutrality as a means to unite states through dialogue and mediation.
Sultan Qaboos' emphasis on diplomacy is not just a small state survival strategy—Oman’s diplomacy often diverges from other small Gulf states. As early as the late 1970s, amid discussion on forming the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), Muscat warned its future co-members that becoming an anti-Iran alliance would be counterproductive to the Gulf’s long-term security interests. Oman has consistently refused to isolate Iran since the 1979 revolution; it remained neutral during the long 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Attempts to forge regional unity explain why Sultan Qaboos even wanted Iraq, Iran and Yemen to be members of the GCC’s security architecture when early discussions on the GCC were occurring.

Oman’s reputation as a neutral GCC outlier has continued into more recent years. In 2014, Oman did not sideline Qatar for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood and chose to keep its ambassador in Doha. Nor did it support the 2017 boycott of Qatar; it has preserved its relations with the country, but refused to criticize the actions against Qatar. In 2013, Muscat also opposed GCC military integration, an idea that was initially supported by all others, but is now widely considered unattainable. Oman is also the only GCC state to have offered to send peacekeepers to Yemen.

What about succession?

Ultimately, Oman’s foreign policy can be read two ways. It is a reflection of its limited power as a small state trying to cope with insecurity. Yet, when it behaves differently from other regional small states it shares much in common with, one must look to the role that domestic factors play in threat perceptions. It is Oman’s national identity—an outgrowth of its political history—that underpins its distinctive foreign policy.

Concerns about Oman’s upcoming succession should therefore be assuaged by recognizing that Oman’s deeper contextual framework will always have a bearing on its foreign policy. The next leader will have the advantage of witnessing the success of Sultan Qaboos’ stress on unity and independence as a means of achieving national security. Disregarding history’s lessons and departing from a highly-respected foreign policy approach would be an unwise (and fortunately unlikely) path for the incoming Sultan of Oman to take.

Leah Sherwood is Deputy Director of Research at TRENDS, an Abu Dhabi-based think tank.
II. Analysis


10 Ibid., 73-74.

11 Ibid., “From Theocracy to Monarchy,” 17.


16 Ibid., 33-42.

17 Ibid., 71.


27 Jones and Ridout, Oman, Culture and Diplomacy, 155-56; Lefebvre, Oman’s Foreign Policy in The Twenty-First Century, 100-101; Ibid., 100.


II. Analysis


II. Analysis

Since March 2011, the Syrian civil war has continued to challenge both the moral and legal obligations of states in the Middle East, Europe and beyond. According to the UNHCR, more than 13.5 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance, of which some 4.86 million are registered refugees and 6.5 million are internally displaced persons. The UAE currently hosts more than 242,000 Syrians, and given the country’s demographic and economic particulars, their presence poses unique concerns.

In the field of international relations, rational choice theory assumes that states use certain cost-benefit analysis to justify an intervention approach, particularly when it comes to foreign policy decision-making. The UAE government’s decision to refuse granting refugee status to Syrians, even as it has provided development assistance totaling $700 million and eased its residency rules to allow more than 100,000 Syrians to relocate through the kafala sponsorship system, is driven by some of these considerations. The UAE has allowed Syrian refugees to integrate economically and has provided them with temporary immigration and employment opportunities. However, consistent with the country’s approach to all foreigners, there is no path to citizenship.

Several international rights groups, including Amnesty International, strongly criticize the UAE and the wider Gulf region’s resettlement policies toward Syrian refugees. They claim that the kafala system only...
allows affluent Syrian investors admittance and access to the UAE, not actual refugees. Though it is difficult to verify the alleged differential treatment, the international community emphasizes the presence of class discrimination in the Gulf states’ admissions policies. The UAE government counters by emphasizing its humanitarianism and noting the populist and anti-refugee sentiments in Europe. The UAE’s approach to refugee policy is a rationalist one and is the byproduct of logical calculation given geopolitical and economic constraints and the country’s overarching desire to protect its image as a stable investment hub.

How rational?

National security remains a top priority across the Gulf states. Viewing the Syrian refugee crisis from a national security perspective, the UAE, to an extent, fears that a large Syrian presence may contribute to the rise of domestic terrorism (via the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood affiliated al-Islah group). This perception, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, stems from the UAE’s involvement in bombing raids against the Islamic State. Because the UAE depends on stability to maintain its reputation as a global economic hub, the country is overly careful to protect its security interests.

As such, the UAE views any minor act of political disturbance as a direct threat to the stable business-friendly climate in the Gulf region. With the structural demographic imbalance—90 percent of the UAE’s population are foreign workers—a potential influx of refugees (with no work permit or exit date) would threaten the precarious demographic base and further impact Emirati culture. As the researchers Michael Ewers and Justin Gengler acknowledge, “incorporating 30,000 refugees into the Gulf city-states is a much larger task than in Germany, a country of 80 million” given the state’s size, governance capacity and resources. A potential influx of Syrian refugees could thus pose resource and bureaucratic constraints, and open up governance and citizenship pathway issues in the country.

In comparison to certain Eastern European countries, including Hungary, Ukraine and Romania, the UAE’s decision not to admit Syrians as status refugees is not based on xenophobia. Hyper-diverse communities have long been welcome in the UAE, and Syrians are fellow Arabic speakers.

Economic concerns at the fore

The UAE’s desire to ensure economic stability underpins its rational calculation toward the Syrian refugee crisis. The UAE is a major regional employment provider, and it has produced at least seven million jobs between 2000 and 2010. In 2016 alone, the World Bank estimated that the UAE was the third largest outward remittance market globally, contributing $20 billion. The UAE thus carefully considers any factors, including the Syrian refugee crisis, that could impact its prized economic role.

In addition to domestic security and economic considerations, the UAE has the critical duty to consider other factors, including, but not limited to, persistent low oil prices, high youth unemployment and regional conflicts. These factors reinforce the UAE’s protective approach and choices toward the crisis. It is also worth noting that the UAE and other Gulf states are not signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee convention, nor the 1967 Protocol, and are therefore not legally mandated to admit refugees. With the uncertain economic outlook, the UAE and other Gulf states continue to face complex governance challenges as they attempt to offset declining government revenues through new indirect taxes (e.g. VAT) to ease financial pressures and strategically adjust to deteriorating economic circumstances.

Given the complex geopolitical and economic concerns, the UAE has sought to protect its interests by maintaining the status quo. The refugee admission culture of several European states, combined with generous social welfare systems and citizenship rights, has led many Syrians to instead prefer asylum in
Europe than temporary residence in the Gulf—which provides no social welfare and citizenship pathways, only temporary employment through kafala irrespective of nationality. Moreover, the young and well-educated Syrian refugee population can help eliminate labor market shortages in aging European societies, particularly Germany. As for the Syrians that remain in the Middle East, they prefer neighboring Arab countries like Lebanon and Jordan due to their geographical proximity, more lax visa rules and lower costs of living. While the incentives for Syrians to migrate to European states is higher—and the potential demand is stronger given declining birthrates and aging populations across Europe—it is crucial to differentiate Syrian refugees and their objectives in identifying destination countries.

In the future, both foreseeable volatilities and uncertainties will impact the UAE’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis. First, if the price of oil continues to decline over time, the UAE and other Gulf states may impose more restrictive and limited foreign policy interventions in the context of humanitarian assistance. Given their internal challenges, Gulf states would continue to impose restrictive immigration policies toward refugees or migrants in general. Second, if both economic and political stability and development are maintained over time, then the UAE and other Gulf states may impose more proactive foreign policy interventions. At the same time, as refugee and asylum-seeker flows increase due to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Gulf and European states will likely face critical challenges in governing the refugee problems.

An economic boon?

The Syrian refugee crisis is the most urgent humanitarian crisis today. If properly and strategically reintegrated, refugees and other future migrant flows can contribute to the UAE’s long-term economic development and well-being. The UAE and wider Gulf region, with the help of international organizations, needs to develop contingency plans to proactively respond to future outbreaks of refugee flows in the Middle East. This will help develop stronger, practical and actionable plans relating to resettling refugees and asylum-seekers in the long run.

Furthermore, the emotional debate surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis deflects attention away from a state’s rational and calculated responses to its constraining environment. While there might be ideal solutions and comprehensive steps that can be taken by respective states to address the crisis, it appears that the UAE has carefully calibrated the costs and benefits associated with its actions. Although by no means comprehensive and exhaustive, the UAE seems to have based its foreign policy decisions regarding the Syrian refugee crisis on preserving domestic security and maintaining economic stability.

Kristian P. Alexander is Assistant Professor in the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi; Froilan Malit Jr. is an Associate at the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration (GLMM) and Population Programme.
II. Analysis


III. Commentary
Moving beyond military-to-military driven relationships is long overdue

The Middle East is undergoing a period of profound transition. There are failed or failing states in Libya and Yemen, a raging civil war in Syria and ongoing instability in Iraq. Egypt has returned to a familiar style of uneasy stability under a new authoritarian regime. The role of political Islam continues to be fiercely contested in the aftermath of the 2010-11 uprisings, and this issue remains at the heart of the ongoing crisis that pits Saudi Arabia and the UAE against neighboring Qatar.

Even the more stable countries in the region are undergoing a period of rapid social and economic transformation. A larger, wealthier and more educated middle class has emerged; there has been a concurrent revolution in the media and information landscapes. The ambitions of a more connected youth generation presage fundamental changes in how these states, societies and citizens relate to each other, conduct business and engage with the rest of the world.

**Diminishing US influence**

The US’s ability to influence events in the region has declined in recent years. The failure and catastrophic consequences of the invasion of Iraq, the subsequent rise of the Islamic State and the ongoing 16-year war in Afghanistan demonstrate the US’s inability to impose stability in the region on its terms. The US is now viewed by many in the region as a primary instigator of turbulence rather than the primary guarantor of stability.

With the traditional Arab power centers of Egypt, Iraq and Syria profoundly weakened, the Gulf states have stepped in to fill the leadership void. There is a rising assertiveness by Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to defend their national interests and expand their influence in the region while at the same time checking Iranian power. To be sure, many of the region’s conflicts today do not lend themselves to solutions crafted or imposed by external powers. For example, the Syrian civil war and the debate over the future role of political Islam will require complex and evolving local or regional solutions.

The emerging political and strategic landscape in the Middle East will therefore have to be largely defined by regional players in a complex dance of competition and cooperation.

There is evidence of this trend in the decision of the recently-formed “quartet” of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain to sever ties with Qatar in June to force a change in Doha’s foreign policy. Crucially, this diplomatic break was not coordinated with Washington, and some parts of the US government were taken by surprise when it was announced—events could not have unfolded in such a manner ten years ago.

**Rethinking US engagement**

To regain its standing and credibility, the US needs to recognize regional realities in all their
complexity as they are today and not as they were years ago. For too long, the US has focused almost exclusively on the military-to-military relationships that now define most of its bilateral relationships. Therefore, when the military presence is reduced (as what happened when the Obama administration began withdrawing from Iraq), allies interpret that to mean the US is disengaging from the region. When the military relationship is the primary means of engagement, it naturally becomes the defining factor shaping US interests in the region, or at least local perceptions of them.

For this reason, US military leaders have been publicly calling for increased financial and human resources for the State Department. US involvement in the complex conflicts in the region since 9/11 have highlighted the need for a broader diplomatic presence that encompasses cultural and language expertise at the country-specific level. The military cannot and should not take the lead in developing the civil society, academic and political leadership linkages needed to develop the in-depth understanding of countries crucial to US national interests. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has said it would make sharp budget cuts to the State Department that, if enacted, would cripple US diplomacy for the next decade.

The new US administration should instead focus on strengthening and broadening bilateral relations, particularly on the diplomatic front. One size never fits all in the Middle East, and now more so than ever. Regional allies will more readily engage and partner with the United States when relationships are based on an in-depth understanding of their interests, and a strong sense of mutual trust and respect are established. More than ever, this is essential for effective US involvement in today’s Middle East.

Marcelle M. Wahba is the President of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and a retired career Foreign Service Officer who served as US Ambassador to the UAE from 2001 to 2004.
As Texas seeks to rebuild after Hurricane Harvey, Gulf donors have been among the first to offer aid. The UAE offered $10 million, while Qatar topped this with a $30 million donation, the largest of any foreign country so far. Such gestures of economic support, which also came from countries as diverse as Venezuela and Israel, illustrate that international aid plays a variety of important soft power roles: in relationship-building, foreign policy signaling and simple public relations, as well as its more overt aims of humanitarian and development assistance.

Over the past 15 years, a combination of hydrocarbons wealth and growing foreign policy ambition have led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments to become major players among the emerging international aid donors. According to the OECD, for the last three years, the UAE has given a higher percentage of its Gross National Income (GNI) as aid than any other country it has data for. In 2016, UAE aid was equivalent to 1.12 percent of GNI, far above the OECD average of 0.3 percent. For its part, Kuwait has become the sixth-largest donor to Syrian refugees, and the largest donor to them per capita, through the UN. Saudi officials have said their country donates an even higher percentage of GDP, but aid statistics for Saudi Arabia (and Qatar) are much less transparent than for the UAE and Kuwait. Moreover, the OECD data does not account for the private donations that make up a significant part of the financial flows coming from the Gulf—these contributions affect the soft power and public perceptions of Gulf states even though they are not directly controlled by government.

**Aid money, in perspective**

This is not the peak era of Gulf aid. As a proportion of GDP, it reached far higher levels in 1973, when the oil embargo and resulting price spike left Gulf states with huge fiscal and current account surpluses—and an awareness that poorer oil-importing countries had suffered as a result. That year, the UAE spent an unprecedented 12 percent of its GNI on aid, while both Kuwait and Saudi spent a similarly robust 8.5 percent, setting up development funds including the Islamic Development Bank. Over time, aid donations declined. But since the most recent oil-price boom began in 2003, Gulf aid has surged again, at a time when the Gulf states have also become more important foreign policy players.

At the moment, GCC governments face competing pressures over aid. With today’s lower oil price environment, and austerity at home in Saudi Arabia in particular, public opinion is likely less sympathetic to overseas aid spending. At the same time, however, the Qatar crisis makes it even more likely that the Gulf states will be competing with each other for the soft power that aid is generally presumed to bring.

**Staying close to home**

Over the past decade, Gulf aid has been increasingly tied to strategic foreign policy aims, and has been heavily concentrated in a few key countries...
that each government prioritizes. Rhetoric and literature from Gulf donor organizations usually describes a broad international reach, listing large numbers of projects in many different countries. But the vast majority of spending is concentrated close to home, in countries prioritized for their political importance rather than development needs.

For instance, the driver of the recent surge in UAE aid has been its support for the Sisi government in Egypt, which it sees as a lynchpin of authoritarian stability against a transnational political Islam. After Egypt’s military overthrew the Brotherhood in 2013, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait gave its government $15 billion. And in 2015, aid to Egypt accounted for 64 percent of the UAE’s entire aid spend.

For Qatar, according to data reported through UN-OCHA’s humanitarian aid tracking system, three-quarters of its 2016 aid spending went to just three countries: Syria (41 percent), Libya (22 percent) and Jordan (10 percent). From a soft power point of view, Qatar has actually had more value from the aid and economic ties it has established with Morocco, which has vowed to stay neutral in the Gulf crisis but indicated its sympathy for Qatar by symbolically sending it food aid.

Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia data published in August 2017 by its recently-established humanitarian aid agency, King Salman Humanitarian Relief Centre (KSRelief), shows projects worth $629.5 million in Yemen, compared to $30.2 million in Syria and $18.2 million in Somalia. The decision to pledge further money to Yemen through various UN funds helps to ensure that it is seen as a key player in the country’s reconstruction as well as in its conflict. This has also enabled Riyadh to offset or dilute some of the criticism it has faced within the UN system over Yemen, by making UN agencies depend upon it.

That being said, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have a general preference for bilateral aid rather than working through multilaterals. This form of assistance can be more closely tied to relationship-building—and to the political influence that often comes as an intangible, unspoken “return on investment” where aid is concerned.

The close linkage between aid and foreign policy reflects the growing foreign policy assertiveness of Gulf leaders over the past two decades.

Aid and foreign policy activism

The close linkage between aid and foreign policy reflects the growing foreign policy assertiveness of Gulf leaders over the past two decades, which represents a particular change for the UAE and Qatar, countries that were previously seen as too small to have much international influence. Nevertheless, this influence has also led to calls for the Gulf states to take on more responsibility for the humanitarian fallout of regional crises—namely Syria and Yemen. In September, the head of the UN’s World Food Programme said Saudi Arabia should fund 100 percent of its aid appeal for Yemen because of its role in fueling the conflict. And overall, Western donors have mixed feelings about the rise of Gulf donors; they want to work with them but sometimes competing agendas make this difficult. As Gulf countries continue to pay more, Western countries will naturally have less leverage.

For most of the last decade, it was easy for Gulf donors to ramp up aid budgets, as conflicts in the region escalated at a time when oil and gas revenues were ballooning. Now the uncertainty continues, but with less wealth to draw upon. Recipient countries will probably seek to bid up the price of their friendship as the soft power competition between Gulf states heats up. Yet this pressure will also dictate greater value for aid money—political as well as economic.

Jane Kinninmont is a Senior Research Fellow and the Deputy Head of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House.
Cairo and the Qatar Crisis
by H.A. Hellyer

Egypt did not orchestrate the diplomatic break but is happy to ride along

The continuing 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis has shed renewed light on Egypt’s relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Cairo has aligned itself with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, positioning itself as an adversary of Qatar. But questions have emerged: what are Cairo’s priorities with regards to the GCC as a whole, and, in particular, countries within that conglomerate of states?

Egypt’s close ties to the GCC states dates back decades. There are millions of Egyptians who have found employment within the GCC over the past 40 years, and Egypt has benefited a great deal from the remittances these expatriates send home. At a time when the Egyptian economy is facing monumental challenges, the relative strength of all GCC currencies is much more favourable than it has been in years. This has also given the Gulf region considerable sway in the Egyptian economy—as does the fact that Gulf firms make substantial direct investments into the Egyptian public and private sectors.

The Qatar crisis, in context

Cairo’s tensions with Doha predate the latest diplomatic row. Although this dispute is misleadingly called the “GCC crisis,” it does not encompass the entire GCC, and Egypt remains a significant actor within this dispute. Cairo has been hostile to Doha particularly since 2013 for harboring elements of the Egyptian opposition, primarily Brotherhood figures deeply opposed to the regime led by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

For reasons that needn’t be repeated here, Doha has pursued a supportive stance of most Muslim Brotherhood organizations and offshoot groups in the region. This has put Doha at odds with the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular. For different reasons, these three countries are strongly opposed to the Brotherhood. However, simply viewing Doha as a backer of revolution and the rest as backers of the status quo oversimplifies their positions. Both the UAE and Qatar found common ground and supported the uprisings in Libya and in Syria. They also, along with Saudi Arabia, opposed the uprising in Bahrain.

Nor can it be neatly said that Doha supports Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism and the others reject it—even though this would be more useful as an explanatory tool. Each state has pursued multifaceted stances since 2011 that depended on what they considered to be the most appropriate way forward. Had there been a slew of Arab leftists, as opposed to Brotherhood sympathizers, working in Doha’s government and media apparatus in 2011, the country’s perception of what direction to pursue might have been very different. Had the UAE not had such vocal domestic Libyan advocates calling for the overthrow of Qaddafi in 2011, their policy might have been different as well.

Be that as it may, the consequences of the 2011 uprisings meant that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the
UAE and Bahrain all converged in 2017 in their aims vis-à-vis Qatar and the GCC. For Egypt, this meant recognizing Riyadh as the main powerhouse within the region that would define the parameters for “acceptable” policy decisions for the rest of the GCC. In practical terms, that wouldn’t necessarily require an absolute replication of Saudi policies—after all, Oman has managed to carve out its own distinctive approach within the regional bloc. But, and this is where it differed greatly from Qatar, it did so tactfully and under the radar. Qatar’s use of Al Jazeera, its state-owned media apparatus, to support the Brotherhood to criticize the Egyptian government’s policies has particularly angered Cairo. Egypt’s influence has waned

Qatar’s approach continues to leave Egypt in a difficult spot. Unlike decades past, Cairo does not possess the same sort of regional influence or leverage that it once had, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are the ones leading the charge against Doha, and Cairo is happily along for the ride. More broadly, Egypt plays a minimal role in the Syrian war and is not the mover-and-shaker it once was when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In general, Cairo’s foreign policy star has waned a great deal as different parts of the GCC region are grabbing a lot more attention and influence—whether for good or for bad is another question.

For this reason, when it comes to alliances with different GCC states, Cairo has been carefully side-stepping policies it disagrees with for as long as it can. Although Cairo is aligned with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, it doesn’t see eye-to-eye with either on President Bashar al-Assad and the critical issue of Syria. Cairo is certainly pleased with Abu Dhabi’s opposition to political Islamism—particularly Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups—but Saudi Arabia remains the home of purist Salafism.

In the myriad web that is Arab politics, it may be that little is particularly consistent—Egypt’s relationship with the GCC is perhaps unsurprising in that regard.

Dr. H.A. Hellyer is a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Atlantic Council, the Royal United Services Institute and the author of A Revolution Undone: Egypt’s Road Beyond Revolt.
The Way Forward in Yemen

by Ibrahim Fraihat

Only a ceasefire can halt the war and provide relief to millions

“completely man-made catastrophe,” Stephen O’Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs at the UN, described the situation in Yemen during a Security Council meeting held in August. He added: “millions of people in Yemen are facing a triple tragedy: the specter of famine, the world’s largest ever single-year cholera outbreak, and the daily deprivation and injustice of a brutal conflict that the world is allowing to drag on and on.” Yemen has been the country where everyone has failed: the Saudi-led coalition and its backer, the US government; the Houthi-Saleh alliance and its patron, Iran.

No winners, only losers

The Saudi-led coalition’s 30-month war in Yemen has failed miserably to meet its declared objectives of ending the Houthi-Saleh coup and reinstalling the ousted Abdurabbuh Mansour Hadi government. In Aden, the only city “liberated” from Houthi control, the coalition has been unable to launch a meaningful reconstruction process for more than two years now. There is a real risk that Yemen may become a failed state—large-scale displacement (over one million Yemenis have already been displaced), piracy, intransigent poverty and terrorism are all on the rise. If this war continues, Saudi Arabia will end up facing graver security threats along its southern border than those that motivated it to launch airstrikes in the first place.

For the Houthis, their first failure is a moral one. In 2004, the Houthis had rebelled against the social, political and economic marginalization they were subjected to by Saleh’s central government in Sanaa. Today, they partner with Saleh to oppress their fellow Yemeni citizens who had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them in Change Square back in 2011 to topple his autocratic regime. Houthi prisons are now filled with many of these same youth revolutionaries, journalists and political activists.

The Houthis’s second failure relates to governance. The Houthis continue to blame the collapse of the country’s health and economic systems solely on the Saudi-led coalition—there are currently more than half a million suspected cholera cases. Yet keeping Sanaa’s streets clean, a basic requirement to fight cholera, is not something that Saudi Arabia has prevented the Houthis from doing.

Beyond the Arab Gulf

The failures extend to actors beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Politically, Iran has been unable to protect its Houthi allies during 30 months of Saudi-led bombardment. Diplomatically, the country has failed to block UN Security Council Resolution 2216 that called on the Houthis to immediately and unconditionally “withdraw their forces from all areas they have seized.” Although Iran can easily fund the civil war, it cannot alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe that is resulting from it.

Perhaps worst of all, Iran’s role may be contributing to rising sectarianism in Yemen. The Zaydi Shia minority, who mostly make up the Houthis, are backed by Iran. This feature risks creating
structural antagonism against the Zaydi minority that will take decades to undo—Yemenis are already accusing them of being Iran’s proxy in the country.

Further afield, the familiar US security-focused approach, which includes the use of drones and lengthy support for Saleh’s corrupt regime, has allowed al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) to thrive in Yemen. If this war continues, the Islamic State is well-poised to supplant AQAP given that it was recently driven out of its base in Mosul.

**A ceasefire?**

Despite this gloomy picture, there are still ways to end the conflict. Firstly, a ceasefire must be declared immediately—there is no military solution to this conflict, and neither the Saudi-led coalition nor the Houthis have made real gains in the past two years. Secondly, a transitional technocrat government should be formed to replace the Houthi-Saleh government in Sanaa. Delivering humanitarian assistance and holding parliamentary elections within six months should be the two major tasks guiding such a government. In the meantime, generous humanitarian assistance from the international community can help save Yemen from total collapse.

As for Yemen’s political parties, inclusive and genuine national dialogue should be launched that builds on the 2015 national dialogue that all parties agreed to. At the same time, no arrangements can ever work if they are toothless—humanitarian assistance, parliamentary elections and the formation of a technocratic government must be supported by a firm position from the Security Council that will impose tough sanctions on any party that attempts to hinder the implementation of such a plan.

*Dr. Ibrahim Fraihat is an Associate Professor of International Conflict Resolution at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, an Affiliate Scholar at Georgetown University and the author of Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia After the Arab Spring.*
Oman and the
Gulf Diplomatic Crisis
by Abdullah Baabood

Escalating regional tensions test Oman’s distinctive foreign policy approach

The ongoing diplomatic rift between Qatar and its neighbors—mainly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt—was largely unforeseen, and, with no prologue, took most observers by surprise. In addition, the timing, severity and magnitude of the diplomatic crisis was alarming to all. This crisis has major ramifications for the region’s stability, security and even the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) itself, especially as the crisis deepens and remains unresolved. It has also presented Oman, a member of the GCC, with some opportunities but also some challenges to its main foreign policy principles.

Oman’s stance

Oman’s neutral position in the current dispute is textbook Omani foreign policy. The Sultanate has long pursued an independent foreign policy stance, and has avoided falling into any particular faction or political bloc—maintaining friendly relations with neighbors and favoring non-interference in the internal affairs of other states as well as respect for international law, conventions and customs.

As a result, Oman has not sided with any party of the conflict despite enjoying a close relationship with Qatar. Doha at first looked to their counterparts in Muscat to mediate the row, and Oman initially agreed. But recognizing the sensitivities, Oman realized that it cannot play the role of principal mediator. The Sultanate chose to maintain its position of impartiality and non-interference—reverting to its typical strategy of supporting mediation and pursuing quiet diplomacy to bring the two sides together toward reconciliation. This approach explains why Oman’s foreign affairs minister, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, recently met with Qatari officials both in Doha and Muscat to discuss bilateral relations, regional developments, and, significantly, Oman’s support for Kuwaiti- and US-led mediation efforts.

Preserving the GCC

Although Oman deviates from the GCC on certain aspects of foreign policy, it recognizes the institution’s importance for regional security and economic cooperation. These have always been Oman’s top priorities, and there is no doubt to the Sultanate that the GCC has played an integral role in enhancing prosperity and maintaining stability in the Arabian Peninsula.

The prospect of the Gulf crisis escalating into further tensions or military action between GCC members that may also involve other regional powers—primarily Iran and Turkey—adds more complications to an already-volatile security environment in the region. Oman already feels under pressure from the ongoing war at its own doorstep in Yemen. The Sultanate fears that the longer the diplomatic crisis drags on, the more difficult it will be for all sides to reach a compromise, which could further undermine the GCC as an institution.

To be sure, the Qatar blockade has presented Oman with some much-needed economic oppor-
opportunities, especially in light of the increasing budget deficit that Oman has faced in recent years. The national carrier Oman Air has gained a significant advantage over its rivals (Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways) because it does not face the same airspace restrictions resulting from the dispute. As well, Qatar Airways has routed much of its air traffic to Muscat International Airport, and has launched a new route to Oman’s Sohar International Airport. With Qatar being denied access to its only land border with Saudi Arabia and to UAE ports, on which it has traditionally relied on for imports and exports, Qatar has now turned to the Omani ports of Sohar and Salalah. According to Oman’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the volume of trade between Oman and Qatar has increased by 2000 percent since the first three months of the blockade. Oman is also poised to receive more much-needed Qatari foreign investment.

At the same time, such economic gains have not obscured Oman’s vision that regional integration and cooperation offer more long-lasting stability and economic prosperity than the quick and short-term opportunities presented by this crisis. Moreover, the measures taken against Qatar contravene existing GCC agreements like the Customs Union and Common Market, which demands the free flow of people, goods and capital. The fact that the blockade was initiated without any regard to GCC institutions and decision-making mechanisms, including the GCC Supreme Council or its Dispute Committee, has set a troubling precedent that is worrying for Oman.

Who’s next?

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Riyadh is attempting to pressure the smaller GCC states into aligning closely with its approach and cutting off ties with Tehran. The ongoing crisis might be a harbinger of how Saudi Arabia exercises this pressure—and this is unsettling for smaller Gulf states, especially Oman. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have already signaled their displeasure with Oman’s role in the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 (JCPOA), as well as the Sultanate’s burgeoning relations with Iran across a host of sectors including energy, trade, investment and defense. Both countries have accused Oman of undermining the collective security of the GCC by cooperating closely with Tehran, particularly in Yemen, a charge which Oman has categorically denied. If Qatar’s relations with Iran were a factor for the punitive Saudi-led blockade, Oman may be apprehensive about suffering the same fate given its relations with Iran and its rather historically independent foreign policy.

There is no doubt that the ongoing crisis and the fear of further escalation poses a major foreign policy dilemma for Oman. Consistent with its neutral stance, Oman has maintained ties with Doha, sparing the latter from isolation, and has sought to resolve the gravest internal GCC crisis since the organization’s founding in 1981. Muscat fears that a failure to settle the crisis will break up the council and thus rein in its independent foreign policy, which would directly undermine vital Omani national interests and dramatically exacerbate regional instability. Oman will therefore continue to build up its relations with Iran to counterbalance Saudi dominance, in addition to helping support regional and international mediation efforts to find a quick resolution to the current Gulf crisis.

Dr. Abdullah Baabood is the Director of the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University.
The Gulf and the Muslim Brotherhood

by Sir John Jenkins

Islamism is central to understanding the 2017 GCC diplomatic crisis

Much analysis of the current Gulf diplomatic crisis suggests it is simply a clash of egos. This is to trivialize something that arises out of the logic of five decades of Gulf development and poses fundamental questions not just about the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) but the region itself.

A brief history

The question of Islamism—above all the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)—is central to the current dispute. Although the movement was never allowed to organize inside Saudi Arabia, the MB’s links to the Gulf go back to the organization’s founding. And by the 1950s, it had embedded itself in the region. The group’s support for the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and then the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 came as shocks to Gulf leaders. In some places, too, the presence of proselytizing and Salafized Brothers and the support provided to the MB and its offshoots by religious institutions produced an ideological ferment, combining MB political activism and Qutbist takfirism with an intense focus on issues of doctrine and personal conduct. This diverse regional movement—known as the Islamic sahwa (“awakening”)—came in the 1990s to pose a powerful ideological challenge to existing dispensations.

In the late 1990s, the then-Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, stigmatized the MB as deviationists. In 2002, the late Prince Nayef spoke bitterly about the Saudi and Kuwaiti experience in 1990-91, and accused the MB of betraying the trust of the Gulf states.

In addition, many Gulf Arabs saw the secretive and cell-based Islamic Da’wa party as a Shia version of the MB. Da’wa in Iraq arose out of the same milieu as the MB, modeling itself on them and (like AQ and IS) adopting its key texts: Hassan al-Banna and especially Sayyid Qutb cross sectarian boundaries. Radical Shia Islamisms have undergone a similar process of globalization and deculturation. And there is simultaneous attraction and repulsion between Islamism’s Sunni and Shia poles.

The events of the Arab Spring hit the Gulf region hard. Those who welcomed the ascent of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt were states that saw an opportunity to advance their own purposes. But opponents, like the Saudis and Emiratis, were appalled.

The current dispute

This complex historical experience is the background to the current crisis in the Gulf, and it has exposed fundamental differences. Some see political Islamism in its many forms as the wave of the future; others as a permanent force that needs to be accommodated; and some as the most serious challenge to the stability, prosperity and security of the region and its ruling elites since the high tide of Nasserism in the 1960s.

For the first two groups, the key is to embrace and domesticate Islamism within existing institutions. The Egyptian military may have removed...
the FJP and suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood—with substantial popular support—in 2013. But, reflecting a characteristic teleological determinism, they think this will eventually be reversed. Time is on the side of the Islamists.

Those in the last group profoundly disagree, as do many on the receiving end of interventions in favor of the MB and other Islamisms. They think resistance is needed. For them, the MB’s conduct from the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution, and, most egregiously once they secured power, confirmed their ultimate goal was to gain control of the Arab world’s most populous and culturally resonant state, to ensure they remained in power indefinitely and to promote their ideology across a region prepared for it by 80 years of sustained effort. Events in Libya, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen showed the MB would not have stopped at the Red Sea. Nasser had the same hegemonic ambitions—this was an Islamist reboot.

For the Saudis, the MB has come to represent a profound ideological threat to the basis of their state. For them, it is a secretive, partisan and divisive organization dedicated to a self-defined renewal of Islam and the establishment of a transnational Islamic state through incremental but ultimately revolutionary political activism, using tactical violence if necessary. The MB mimics some central features of a state in its hierarchical structure and the requirement for members to swear an exclusive oath of loyalty to the Murshid. However, it repudiates national identity and any loyalty other than that to the Murshid and God.

The Saudis believe this outlook represents a dangerously radical misreading of Islamic history in the service of “anarchy” (their term). Their Islam needs no tajdeed—the kingdom is a legitimate Islamic state, with a religiously legitimate ruler, and all Saudis owe absolute loyalty to him as wali al amr. Any advice to him from the ulama should therefore be discreet. Anyone who acknowledges fealty to another is considered disloyal to the king by definition. This is also their view of the heterodox doctrine of wilayat al faqih (or indeed the Shirazi doctrine of shura al fuqaha’). For the Saudis, it is above all a question of territorial allegiance and loyalty to a sovereign individual. That is why they have been engaged now for at least a decade in the task of constructing a national identity based precisely on loyalty to the ruling dynasty, its reading of Islam, and a set of territorial and historical characteristics. They are now bent on modernizing the kingdom—and political Islamism threatens this project.

There is, of course, a significant apologetic element to these claims given the kingdom’s past support for the MB (including Qutbists) from the late 1920s to the 1980s, as well as its encouragement of pan-Islamism and the resulting role that variants of Saudi-based Salafism played across the region since the 1970s. The Saudis are concerned about the shape-shifting nature of radical Islamist thought in general and the threat this poses to national cohesion and identity. They do not want their guardianship of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, to be politicized by others. This, like any internationalization of control or diversion to other places of pilgrimage, notably Najaf, would undermine the kingdom’s authority. The struggle is no longer an external one against the forces of godless nationalism—it is domestic and within Islam itself.

In contrast, the Emiratis, who acknowledge a more diverse jurisprudential tradition, see political Islamism not just as subversive but opposed to everything they stand for in terms of a neo-patrimonial Arab and Islamic, highly securitized but also socially permissive modernity. It is not an irresistibly rising tide but a threat to the prosperity and cohesion of the UAE, a place where cultures can meet, tolerate difference, prosper and still remain intact within the framework of conservative social traditions and the country’s major global ambitions.

The Emiratis are angered by the public license given to Qaradawi and others to question their Islamic credentials and therefore legitimacy. They feel the challenge—in a way larger states might not—of maintaining harmony among large and diverse expatriate populations as well as soli-
III. Commentary

darity among nationals. They think the MB instrumentalize the Gulf, and they want to avoid disharmony—domestically with the more conservative Qawasim emirates, where Isolah has strong roots, and with some powerful neighbors.

Both the UAE’s and Saudi’s immediate focus then is on Egypt. Its capture by the MB alongside the spread of Iranian power; the emergence of a new, battle-hardened and transnational Shia gendarmerie in the Levant; and the rise of ISIS would have been the worst challenge the Gulf as a whole had ever faced. That is why both countries now attach so much importance to binding Egypt into any serious new security dispensation in the region.

Some claim Saudi pressure on the MB has eased since January 2015. But the issue was never about the existence of political Islamism but its instrumentalization. Saudi and Emirati hostility to MB activism after 2011 was not new, and their proscription of the MB was always selective. We have seen this most markedly in Yemen, Bahrain and Jordan.

As long as Islamists, including the MB, serve the interests of their host state and its allies, everything is fine. When they become perceived agents of fitna (“sedition”) under external direction or independently, then they are no longer tolerated. This is the real quarrel the Saudis and the UAE has with Qatar—and indeed with Turkey.

A rational response?

Some may say these fears of the MB are exaggerated. But we should at least make an effort to understand how the key regional actors see the situation, what drives their actions and where their real interests lie. We should recall that a plurality of young Arabs in annual surveys say the UAE is the place they most admire, and that the current Saudi reform program is precisely the sort of plan western governments and economists have consistently called for. The current crisis may have been managed sub-optimally, but when we reflect on the context, we might conclude that it is far from being personality-driven. We might also conclude that it was the engagement with Islamists in the first place—constructed as it was on interlocking personal relationships that the MB were adept at manipulating—that was personalized and unreflective, and that the reaction to them has been structural and rational. In this view, it is at least in part a reaction to the MB’s instrumentalization of those who had thought they were doing the instrumentalization.

Nor is the current crisis a simple clash between democracy and authoritarianism. It is a question of the nature of the state, national security, who gets to determine social and political normativity, and who uses whom—all in an age where the real threats are not to political systems but to the existence of states themselves.

Sir John Jenkins is the Executive Director of The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Middle East and a former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia.
IV. Interviews
IV. Interviews

H.E. Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani
Minister of Foreign Affairs
State of Qatar

Gulf Affairs: How would you describe the pillars of Qatari foreign policy? What is Qatar’s approach to the ongoing conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Libya?

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani: Qatar’s foreign policy is based on four pillars: encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes, supporting the right of peoples to self-determination, respecting sovereignty (which includes non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states) and cooperation with all nations that seek peace.

What distinguishes Qatar’s foreign policy is that it is based on deep-rooted principles—most importantly, it is devised with a future outlook. We implement a policy not for our generation, but for the generations to come.

Qatar’s priorities in the region and beyond are to maintain an open-door policy, and to encourage dialogue and political settlements. Qatar’s regional positions, particularly in Yemen, Syria and Libya, have been in coordination and in line with the positions of the international community and United Nations resolutions.
IV. Interviews

Gulf Affairs: In recent years, Qatar has been active in mediation efforts between Hamas and Fatah, the US and the Taliban, and in the Sudanese conflict. Can you elaborate on the philosophy behind these efforts? Any notable achievements?

Al-Thani: Since being elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Qatar has mediated nearly 10 regional and international conflicts—investing diplomatic and political efforts between various factions, entities and countries. Qatar’s mediation efforts are at the request of the concerned parties, are done without interfering in the internal affairs of others and are rooted in a vision to achieve the convergence of views—they are meant to find sustainable solutions for conflicts and differences of opinion. Qatar also hosts negotiations between conflicting parties and contributes as a facilitator of dialogue between them.

Over the years, these mediation efforts resulted in many successes that brought about and maintained international peace and security. Qatari mediation played an important role in the Doha Peace Agreement in Darfur, releasing Djiboutian prisoners of war in Eritrea, releasing hostages in Syria and ending the presidential vacuum in Lebanon.

Gulf Affairs: Qatar was the last GCC country to sit on the UN Security Council, which it did from 2006 to 2007. What was the significance of this achievement?

Al-Thani: As part of Qatar’s vision to promote peace and security in the Arab region and wider world, Qatar aimed to be a significant player in the UN Security Council. The achievement was not only the election of Qatar as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2006, but it was in the efforts that Qatar pursued toward its goals of peace and security in the region and beyond. Adopting a preventive diplomacy, Qatar led the negotiations in Lebanon, and, for the first time in the history of the country, joined the UN peacekeeping forces stationed in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

In the context of respecting international law and justice, it is also noteworthy that Qatar’s tough negotiations marked the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Another significant achievement was the proper transfer of the former president of Sierra Leone to The Hague, where Qatar guaranteed that victims witnessed his trial. Since Qatar believes in the key role regional organizations can play, we contributed in drafting resolutions related to the establishment of The African Union/UN Hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in 2007. And while Somalia was a forgotten issue, Qatar worked hard to bring it to the surface—the end result was the establishment of the national reconciliation government in 2006–2007.

Gulf Affairs: A comprehensive military cooperation agreement with the Republic of Turkey was entered into recently, and it includes the deployment of Turkish troops to Qatar. Can you explain the basis for this agreement?

Al-Thani: Turkey is a NATO member and an important regional player. The country is also a strategic partner in pursuing stability and peace in the Middle East. The cooperation agreement is part of the strategic cooperation that we have initiated through the High-Level Strategic Committee established in 2015. Qatar shares similar agreements with the US, UK and France. Together, we all support the coalition fighting against ISIS.
Gulf Affairs: Given the recent intra-GCC tensions, what impact do you believe this might have on GCC unity in the long term? What is Qatar’s long-term vision for GCC cooperation?

Al-Thani: Qatar believes in a strong and united Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) based on shared values and goals that work toward common strategic, economic, political and security interests. Qatar, as a proud member of the GCC, believes in the council’s potential to enhance economic cooperation. Qatar is also a signatory to many future GCC projects, the most significant being the project to integrate all current and future GCC railway networks.

The current crisis has certainly had a negative impact on GCC cooperation, as one of the key tenets of cooperation is the free movement of goods and people. The crisis will have undeniable negative effects on short-term projects and will cause an inconvenience to the lives of many citizens. That being said, we hope that no long-term impact will occur as a result of the crisis.

Despite the fact that this self-inflicted baseless embargo has been the coalition’s most unfortunate development since its formation in 1981, the GCC must reach a renewed basis of understanding and cooperation to ensure it can overcome future challenges.

Gulf Affairs: How significant has the role of soft power and international investment been in fortifying Qatar’s position as an important regional player? In light of recent difficulties with GCC neighbors, is this having an impact on the country’s ability to make deals with major energy consumers and investment partners?

Al-Thani: Qatar views its commitment to its energy partners as absolute. Qatar is committed to the diversification of its economy and expanding its economic partnerships around the world—whether through investments or trade based on common goals of economic development and prosperity for all. We continue to uphold our agreements and supply energy partners without obstruction or delay regardless of the illegal blockade. Although the blockade’s initial impact was aimed at affecting the economy, Qatar immediately implemented its contingency plan and established one of the largest ports in the Middle East with more than 150 destinations around the world. We believe that our relationship with energy consumers is long-term in nature, and we do not see this crisis affecting our relations with our energy partners.

Gulf Affairs: How would you describe the current state of Qatar-Iran relations?

Al-Thani: Qatar and Iran are neighboring states, linked by geographic air and sea borders as well as a shared gas field. We are concerned about the security, peace and stability of the region, which is precisely what drives us to work responsibly on converging the views of the two countries together despite all differences. This approach helps assure desirable outcomes for the entire region. The State of Qatar refuses to look at Iran through the sectarian lens or to frame the region’s conflicts in the Sunni vs Shia paradigm. The nuclear deal provided an opportunity to reintegrate Iran into the international community, and we believe that if differences remain they may yet be resolved through dialogue.
Gulf Affairs: How have Qatar-US relations developed since President Donald Trump took office? Can you elaborate on the recently-signed agreement with the US on combatting terrorism financing?

Al-Thani: A strong relationship and partnership between the United States and the State of Qatar has been developing for decades, and it is characterized by an exceptional and a distinguished strategic bilateral political, military and economic relationship. The establishment of the largest US military base in the Middle East in Qatar reflects the depth of the relationship, and it also reflects the United States' confidence in Qatar and its agenda in combatting terrorism and promoting peace in the region.

His Highness the Emir of Qatar has discussed ways to enhance this partnership with President Trump, who himself is committed to further cooperation in all domains. The recently signed agreement with the United States on counter-terrorism cooperation is the only one of its kind in the region, and it further confirms the cooperation between the United States and Qatar. It also sets a precedent for other countries in the region. This agreement with the US thus strengthens our existing efforts to counter terrorism and complements our vision of a more peaceful Middle East.

Gulf Affairs: Qatar is a crucial supplier of LNG to many Asian countries, and is home to a large number of migrant workers from the Indian sub-continent. To that end, how has Qatar’s foreign policy toward Asian countries developed in recent years?

Al-Thani: Asia’s importance to global peace and security as well as the economy is not new. Qatar has historically strong relations with many Asian countries, and has enhanced them in recent years. Specifically, China, Japan, South Korea and India are Qatar’s largest trading partners. Qatar became the first GCC country to introduce a clearing bank for the Renminbi, and, in 2014, upgraded relations with China to that of a strategic partner. In 2016, Qatar and India signed a pact regarding visas, cyber security and investments. In August 2017, Qatar lifted the visa requirements from the citizens of many Asian countries wishing to visit Qatar, as well as launching additional direct shipping routes to Pakistan and India. Qatar is keen on building long-lasting and strategic relations with all nations in Asia, based on the pursuit of mutual interests and common values.
H.E. Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi
Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Sultanate of Oman

Gulf Affairs: Oman’s foreign policy has often been described as independent and pragmatic. How would you define Oman’s approach to international relations?

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi: Our approach is pragmatic because we have to focus on what is achievable. We are collaborative and inclusive because international problems require multilateral solutions—no country large or small can solve the world’s problems alone. We are guided by humanitarian ideals of tolerance and mutual respect. Finally, we attach great importance to the principle of non-interference.

Gulf Affairs: What are the main security challenges facing Oman today? How is Omani diplomacy mobilized to address them?

Albusaidi: Regrettably, our region of the world is troubled at this present time, and in particular the war in Yemen is a matter of great concern. The focus of our diplomacy is always to keep talking with all parties, to keep lines of communication open. You may have noticed, for instance, that the Sultanate of Oman did not take sides during the 1980–1988 Iraq-Iran war, but equally, we kept our Embassy in Baghdad open during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990.
Gulf Affairs: What is Oman’s position on the war in Yemen? What does Oman see as the solution to the conflict?

Albusaidi: Oman supports peace and a peaceful solution to this conflict. The key first step is a ceasefire. This would create the necessary positive momentum to allow dialogue to gain traction—we have supported a number of initiatives that have so far been unsuccessful. No doubt Omani diplomacy will continue to support all efforts directed at bringing about peace in Yemen. We will also continue to do whatever we can to address the many serious humanitarian issues that arise—whether it is providing medical help, other forms of aid or seeking the release of hostages.

Gulf Affairs: In which areas does Oman want to see greater cooperation with its fellow GCC countries? Does Oman want to see an expansion of the GCC’s mandate?

Albusaidi: In the early 1990s, Oman tried to get agreement for greater defense cooperation, but the moment had already passed. So, no, Oman does not see an expansion in the GCC's mandate at this time. Of course, it is easy to be wise after the event, yet it is worth noting that had we succeeded back in the early 1990s to build a collective and inclusive regional security structure, then the war in Iraq in 2003 would probably never have happened. So much human suffering and many of the region’s current problems would have been avoided. A few years ago, there was talk of a GCC union and also of a single currency. We don't view these suggestions as practical and we would not participate in the event that they materialized.

Gulf Affairs: Compared to other GCC countries, Oman has enjoyed more cordial relations with Iran. How would you explain this difference?

Albusaidi: We Omanis have enjoyed good relations with Iran for a very long time—whether it has been the Iran of the Shah or the Islamic Republic makes no difference. There are important geostrategic factors: we share responsibility with Iran for the security of the Strait of Hormuz and in maintaining extensive and direct access to the Indian Ocean. We look to Iran, but also East Africa, South and Central Asia, and our GCC brothers as partners. We have also long ago settled all territorial issues with our neighbors.

Gulf Affairs: The Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC) is a rare example of cooperation between Arabs and Israelis. Can you explain the Center’s rationale and its main achievements?

Albusaidi: Water is a critical issue for everyone in the region. In the 1990s, when the peace process was on track, we identified the cost of desalination as a major impediment to achieving sustainable water security. We hosted the Water Working Group in Muscat in 1994, and MEDRC was set up soon after in what was called the multilateral phase of the Oslo process. It was a good issue around which all parties could collaborate constructively.

The main achievement has been to keep pressing on in a positive spirit, with all parties concentrating on the technical mission of research, training and capacity building, and refraining from embroiling MEDRC in negative politics. Crucially, despite the deterioration in the peace process, MEDRC is supported by all sides. I should add that Oman, as always, supported peace efforts all the way back to the first Camp David agreement negotiated in 1978.
Gulf Affairs: How have EU-GCC relations developed in recent years? Any notable achievements?

Amb. Michele Cervone d’Urso: Since the signature of the Cooperation Agreement in 1988, EU-GCC bilateral relations have been developing steadily and broadening in scope. What had started off as a more economic-driven agenda has expanded into a wide breadth of partnerships ranging from the common work in fragile countries, to counter-terrorism, to building cooperation mechanisms on climate change, the environment, transport, agriculture and energy. Furthermore, the EU has been able to share its own regional integration experiences and has nurtured continued GCC integration.

One of the most notable achievements in recent years was the May 2017 establishment of the EU-GCC trade and investment dialogue, which provides a platform for discussing trade- and investment-related issues. This is the first such dialogue between EU and Gulf counterparts since the free trade agreement negotiations stalled in 2008. At the political level, I was closely engaged with the Secretary General of the GCC, Abdulatif Al Zayani, in one of the most significant GCC breakthroughs in the past years—the 2011
GCC initiative on Yemen that paved the way to the country’s transition through a power-sharing agreement. That framework was all about “political inclusivity” and a united international community. We also have a wide range of avenues for joint engagement, including the annual EU-GCC ministerial meetings, which have enabled political-level dialogue. This year we had the first dialogue between ambassadors of the GCC and the EU Political and Security Committee. The groundwork for further deepening EU-GCC relations has clearly been laid.

**Gulf Affairs:** The 1988 EU-GCC Economic Cooperation Agreement laid the framework for free trade between the two regional blocs. Why has there been no agreement yet?

**Cervone d’Urso:** The Cooperation Agreement set out a free trade agreement as a key objective of EU-GCC relations. However, the negotiations were interrupted on several occasions—including one instance where a customs union between GCC members needed finalizing. The last interruption occurred in 2008, and no further negotiations have taken place since.

We were close to an agreement—most chapters had been closed and the EU had made proposals to the GCC on the pending issue of export subsidies. However, these proposals were not taken forward despite attempts to clarify the EU proposals to our Gulf counterparts. At this point in time, we might need to undertake a “reality check” on what was previously agreed upon given the changed global and economic contexts and the newly-reformed EU trade policy, should further negotiations take place.

**Gulf Affairs:** What is the EU’s position on the recent crisis between some GCC countries and Qatar?

**Cervone d’Urso:** The EU’s position is that this crisis has to be resolved as swiftly as possible, and the EU remains engaged with the GCC and all its member states. The EU High Representative has been in close touch with all parties, and unequivocally supports the regional mediation efforts of the Emir of Kuwait. The EU has been a historical partner of the GCC, and this crisis has diverted attention away from our strengthened cooperation with the GCC at all levels. The EU has the firm intention to maintain strong relationships and ties with all the Gulf countries. While this is not the first crisis in the region, it appears to be far more serious than past ones, and we remain committed to a regional solution.

**Gulf Affairs:** What is the current status of the JCPOA between Iran, the P5+1 and the EU? Have GCC countries shared their evaluations on the agreement thus far?

**Cervone d’Urso:** The JCPOA is working as intended and is keeping the Iranian nuclear program in check and under close surveillance. The JCPOA is an important element of the global non-proliferation architecture. It does not belong to any single country—it is a multilateral agreement endorsed by Security Council Resolution 2231.

GCC countries support the JCPOA, although some have voiced their concerns on the perceived “limitations” of the agreement. We remain persuaded that the JCPOA is a non-proliferation agreement and there should be other mechanisms to address broader issues outside the scope of the JCPOA, including Iran’s regional activities. Furthermore, we would not be in a better place to address these issues without the JCPOA.
IV. Interviews

Gulf Affairs: Both the EU and GCC are made up of individual member states. How does the EU manage its partnership with the GCC despite European countries often having competing and differing bilateral relationships with Gulf states and even the GCC bloc as a whole? And, will Brexit impact trade exports to the Gulf region?

Cervone d’Urso: The EU works in close partnership with its member states. The Gulf countries also have a long tradition of working with individual European countries; while the EU is a newer actor in the Gulf region, it opened its first Delegation in Riyadh in 2004. The EU is stepping up its engagement with the support of its member states, and is working closely and in complement to the member states’ bilateral engagements.

GCC countries are clearly strategic partners for both the EU and the UK. The Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU-27 are ongoing, so it is premature to anticipate the impact. However, it’s clear that the GCC will maintain its excellent relations with both the EU and the UK regardless of how the discussions unfold.

Gulf Affairs: In your view, what are the main challenges facing the GCC states? How can the EU support the GCC in these areas?

Cervone d’Urso: The challenges cover three main areas. Firstly, the GCC is facing a “youth bulge” that is shaking up the social contract and forcing sky-rocketing domestic expectations in an open and globalized world to be better managed. The EU wants to be a positive partner that accompanies and supports the process of social transformation in the pace of the concerned countries. Secondly, all GCC states share the same need to diversify their traditionally fossil fuel-driven economies. The EU sees itself as a partner in economic diversification for the GCC and is willing to share the experiences of its own economic transformation. The intent is to build stronger partnerships at the regulatory level and between our private sectors—this is essential to ensure the success of any diversification strategies. Thirdly, and finally, the current Gulf crisis has superimposed itself on all of these existing challenges. The GCC has always been seen as a haven for stability and there is a need to ensure that this image prevails in an already-turbulent regional and international environment.

Gulf Affairs: What is the EU’s current stance on the Saudi-led coalition’s intervention in Yemen? What type of solution does the EU support?

Cervone d’Urso: The EU has been at the forefront in calling for an inclusive political solution and has supported the efforts of the UN Secretary General Special Envoy, calling on all parties to engage in negotiations without preconditions. We are concerned about the dismal humanitarian situation and that the Yemeni people can see no “light” out of the current crisis. The EU remains committed to continuing to support all efforts to bring warring parties to the negotiations table, and, to reach a ceasefire and political settlement. It is time to respond to the legitimate demands of the Yemeni people, who want the establishment of a democratic, modern and civil state that respects and protects the rights of all its citizens.
V. Timeline

Select Developments in Foreign Policies of GCC States since 2010

**2010**

May: Iraq sends its first ambassador to Kuwait since the First Gulf War.

May 26: Bahrain and the US agree to expand the US naval base in Mina Salman Port. The project is expected to cost $580 million and will be completed in 2015.

September: The US secures a $60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia. The deal is the largest US arms sale of its kind and includes $30 billion for purchase of new fighter jets.

December: Qatar wins its bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup and is set to become the first Arab country to host the prestigious football tournament.

**2011**

March 12: All member states of the Arab League agree to ask the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone over Libya. The meeting was chaired by Oman’s foreign minister, Yousef bin Alawi bin Abdullah.

March 14: Saudi-led GCC troops enter Bahrain amid protests calling for reforms in the kingdom.

March 26: The UAE announces that it will deploy 12 warplanes to enforce the no-fly zone over Libya.

**2012**

March 14: Saudi Arabia withdraws its diplomatic mission from Syria following an escalation in the country’s uprising.

October 23: The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa makes a historic visit to Gaza and pledges $400 million for development projects.

September 18: The UAE strengthens bilateral ties with Canada with a nuclear cooperation agreement. The agreement comes as Abu Dhabi moves forward with its nuclear program which will rely on Canadian supplies.

**2013**

April 15: The Palestinian Embassy in Kuwait reopens. The embassy was shut down in 1990 during the First Gulf War.

June 20: The Afghan Taliban opens a Doha office, its first official overseas office. The office is meant to facilitate peace talks with the US.

July 18: The United Arab Emirates sends $3 billion in aid to Egypt, with Saudi Arabia promising to send an additional $2 billion.

October 18: Saudi Arabia rejects its seat at the UN Security Council shortly after being elected to it. The move is meant to show displeasure with Washington over its Middle East policies.

October 24: Kuwait and Turkey hold their first Joint Committee for Cooperation meeting, a ministerial-level initiative established in 2008 to improve dialogue and cooperation.
November: Dubai wins its bid to host the World Expo 2020.

December: The GCC announces the formation of a joint military command and police.

2014

March 5: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recall their ambassadors from Qatar. Qatar voices “regret and surprise” but does not pull its own diplomatic staff in response.

October 9: The UAE’s first female fighter pilot, Mariam Al Mansouri, leads an airstrike mission against the Islamic State in Syria.

November 9: Oman hosts key negotiations over the Iran nuclear program. If no deal is secured by November 24, an earlier interim agreement becomes void.

2015

January 20: Qatar and Turkey agree to establish the High-Level Strategic Council, which is aimed at enhancing bilateral relations between the two countries.

January 23: King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud ascends to the Saudi throne. Major changes to the country’s foreign policy ensue.

March: Saudi Arabia brings together a coalition including the GCC states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE for its air campaign in Yemen. Only Oman declines to participate in the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm.


September 4: Forty-five Emirati soldiers were killed fighting Houthi insurgents. This marks the deadliest day of fighting for the UAE since Operation Decisive Storm began.

October 26: Oman’s foreign minister makes a surprise trip to Syria, meeting with President Bashar al-Assad in an attempt to reopen Omani-led mediation efforts regarding the Syrian war. This marks the first time an Arab foreign minister arrived in Syria since 2011.

November 1: The UK and Bahrain hold a groundbreaking ceremony to mark the beginning of construction for a permanent Royal Navy base in Bahrain. The ceremony is part of a wider defense agreement between the UK and Bahrain.

2016

January 3: Saudi Arabia and Bahrain sever their diplomatic relations with Iran following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran one day earlier. The UAE also downgrades its diplomatic presence in Iran.

February 8: Bahrain’s king visits Russia and meets with President Vladimir Putin to discuss economic cooperation as well as peace negotiations in Syria.

August 6: UN-sponsored Yemen talks held in Kuwait come to an end. The talks began on April 21 earlier this year.

October 13: Turkey and the GCC hold the fifth instalment of the High-Level Strategic Dialogue, which was first established in 2008. All parties emphasize the need to relaunch negotiations for a free trade agreement.
September: At a UN summit, the UAE announces that it will welcome 15,000 Syrians over the next five years.

December 7: UK Prime Minister Theresa May attends the 37th annual GCC Summit. Plans to develop closer security, military and trade ties between the UK and GCC are announced.

2017

January 24: The NATO-Istanbul Cooperation Initiative opens a new regional center in Kuwait. The center aims to boost security and military relations among GCC countries.

May: The EU and GCC establish a trade and investment dialogue.

June 5: Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE sever ties with Qatar, beginning what is now referred to as the “Gulf crisis.” Qatari citizens are given 14 days to leave the Gulf countries.

July 11: Qatar and the US sign an agreement to combat terrorism funding. The deal follows Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE severing their diplomatic relations with Qatar and accusing the country of supporting terrorism.

August 24: Qatar restores full diplomatic relations with Iran. Qatar had downgraded its relations following the January 2016 attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Iran.

September: President Trump meets with the Emir of Kuwait at the White House, saying the two leaders have a “great relationship.”

November 4: Bahrain makes territorial claims with regards to Qatar, reopening a border dispute that had previously been settled by the International Court of Justice in 2001. Bahrain also begins imposing visa requirements on Qatari nationals.

November 4: Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announces his resignation from Riyadh. Hariri strongly criticizes Iran and Hezbollah in his address, and alludes to a recent assassination plot against him.
Call for Articles
Gender (Im)Balance in Gulf Societies
Submission due date: Friday, 12 January 2018
Word limit: 1,000 – 1,500 words

Gulf Affairs invites scholars to submit original analytical articles for its upcoming issue entitled “Gender (Im)Balance in Gulf Societies.”

Gulf Affairs is a journal founded by OxGAPS | Oxford Gulf & Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum, a University of Oxford-based platform. The journal is exclusively dedicated to furthering knowledge and dialogue on the pressing issues and challenges facing the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Each issue is dedicated to a particular theme, allowing for a comprehensive coverage from various analytical perspectives and fields of study. Accepted articles are submitted to reviewers for comment prior to publication.

To capture the complexity of the various issues and challenges around gender (im)balance in Gulf societies, articles are encouraged from a wide range of disciplinary lenses, including: Economics, Politics, Law, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Area Studies, Gender Studies, Education and History. Balanced articles supported by sufficient and credible sources that offer a unique perspective on the theme will likely be accepted for publication.1

Gulf Affairs welcomes analytical articles on (though not limited to) the following areas:

- What is the state of gender inequality in Gulf countries? How has this evolved over the years?
- What do we know about the various forms—domestic, institutional, economic and structural—of silent or overt gender violence in the Gulf states?
- How has nation-building—including development agendas, national visions and legal structures—transformed female participation in the GCC workforce?
- How have public and private institutions influenced gender roles in Gulf societies?
- Women in Gulf countries have always played a crucial role in politics. How has female participation in this realm developed over the years?
- What are some stereotypes associated with khaleeji women both inside and outside the region?
- How is social media impacting cultural norms on various gender-related issues such as the expansion of non-segregated social spaces?
- What are the current issues in marriage, divorce and family life in the Gulf states?
- How is masculinity and/or femininity perceived, understood and negotiated in Gulf societies?

Submission Guidelines: Please send articles to gulfaffairs@oxgaps.org by Friday, 12 January 2018. Authors whose articles have been accepted for review will be notified within two weeks after the submission deadline.

1For citing and referencing, use Chicago Manual of Style endnotes.