

Foreign Policy Trends in the GCC States Overview

by Karen E. Young, Theme Editor

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.

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