

# National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations



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## THE RETURN OF STRONG GCC-U.S. STRATEGIC RELATIONS

By Dr. Imad Kamel Harb

November 26, 2014

Numerous recent developments point to a positive and fundamental shift in GCC-U.S. relations. From the U.S. heavy re-engagement in Middle Eastern issues, to the success of the fourth ministerial GCC-U.S. Strategic Dialogue Forum in New York last September, to fighting ISIS, to continuing consultations about Syria, Iraq, Iran and others, it appears that the strategic partnership is being re-established on a different basis than before. This is despite the perpetuation of various disagreements and misunderstandings. Such renewal is bound to have an important impact on the future of bilateral U.S.-GCC relations and many other related issues, especially their joint and respective efforts to effect positive change in the region.

### New Dynamics of the GCC-U.S. Relationship

The current state of affairs between the United States and the GCC countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – is a far cry from public comments by Arabian Gulf officials a few months ago. These intimated what some considered irreparable damage to established strategic relations. GCC governments showed grave concern about America's intention to re-balance to the Asia-Pacific theatre, its attempts to re-habilitate Iran and bring it in from the cold, its abandonment of Iraq to violent extremism and the Islamic Republic, and arguably, its vacillation regarding Syria and its grinding civil war.<sup>1</sup> From its part, the United States showed



*U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry poses for a photo with GCC and Regional Partners meeting participants in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in September 2014. Photo: U.S. Department of State.*

<sup>1</sup> See Abdullah Al Shayji, "The GCC-U.S. Relationship: A GCC Perspective," *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 3 (Fall 2014).

signs of fatigue from its long and costly commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan and produced debatable decisions relating to one of the world's most strategically vital regions.

From whence did these turns in trends and indications emanate? For one, they can be traced to developments since the June collapse of the Iraqi army in its fight against the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which gave a much-needed jolt to what many critics allege was the lethargic American foreign policy in the Levant. For another, they are rooted in the potential and actual massacres of minority civilians in northern Iraq, mass executions of Iraqi soldiers, and credible threats of overpowering Kurdish defenses. Combined, these developments pushed the Obama administration to re-calibrate its response by sending military advisors to Iraq and initiating aerial bombardment of ISIS positions.<sup>2</sup>

But, given Washington's many trepidations about being once again enmeshed in trouble in the Middle East, the American about-face could not be sustained without the effectiveness of willing and capable regional allies. In reality, America's change of policy was the start of a "re-balancing of

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the 're-balance'" back to the Middle East,<sup>3</sup> while, fortuitously, the GCC and other countries saw it as the right decision at the right time for the world's leading superpower.

The United States has obviously re-engaged in the Middle East for the long-term. Equally clear, the GCC states have committed to a broader and more assertive role in the region. As geo-political and geo-strategic realities and conditions develop over the next weeks and months, it will likely become increasingly evident that a strengthened U.S.-GCC relationship is the only practical and prudent alternative for the United States, the GCC countries, and the world at large to help attain and maintain a semblance of sustained stability in the Middle East. An important and thus far little discussed component among these developments in U.S. as well as

GCC policy and behavior is a renewal and reformulation of an alignment with Egypt that was shaken over the last few years. A successful realignment of the ties between Washington and Cairo, coupled with strategic linkages between Egypt and key GCC member-countries, will doubtlessly do much to cement the overall GCC-U.S. relationship.

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<sup>2</sup> Chelsea Carter, Mohammed Tawfeeq, and Barbara Starr, "Officials: U.S. airstrikes pound ISIS militants firing at Iraq's Yazidis," *CNN*, August 10, 2014, at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/09/world/meast/iraq-crisis/>

<sup>3</sup> See Imad Harb, "America's Full-Fledged Return to the Middle East," *Quest for Middle East Analysis*, September 11, 2014, at <http://nebula.wsimg.com/29c422311786a87acb8861ea9a?AccessKeyId=1244196588191A8DB7F7&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

## 1) The GCC-U.S Strategic Cooperation Forum

On September 25, 2014, the GCC-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum's<sup>4</sup> fourth ministerial meeting convened in New York. The meeting was significant for two reasons. First, it indicated a return to the old practices of constant consultation between the United States and GCC countries. Second, it underscored the parties' ongoing joint commitment to the peace and security of the Arabian Gulf and Peninsula. The urgent and pressing need to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria provided a background and an immediate strategic and security environment for the meeting.

The timing could hardly have been more propitious. It occurred following a September 11 gathering of regional actors in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,<sup>5</sup> and a broader one in Paris on September 15<sup>6</sup> in which the participants agreed to establish an international coalition to fight what is arguably the most dangerous extremist organization in the Levant.

However, and as the GCC-U.S. ministerial meeting made clear, fighting ISIS would be but one of numerous facets of strategic cooperation and coordination between the United States and the GCC countries. More specifically, the meeting re-affirmed a pre-existing American commitment to assist in building and enhancing GCC maritime security, constructing an interoperable ballistic

missile architecture, strengthening and expanding their counter-terrorism and furthering their cooperation in economic modernization and development, the expansion of trade and advancing their individual and joint achievements in such areas as trade cooperation, science, education, cultural exchanges, and health services.



***U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry meets with GCC Foreign Ministers in New York City in September 2014 for the GCC-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum's fourth ministerial meeting. Photo: U.S. Department of State.***

In essence, the communique resurrected commitments made in the aftermath of the American diplomatic and military engagement in the GCC region following the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation

in 1991. Then, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was indisputably the only superpower capable of and committed to providing the necessary resources to protect the entire six-country length of the east Arabian littoral and thereby safeguard the public good of peace and security in the area.

But what today's developments make clear is that America's renewed commitment to the Gulf comes as the GCC states, individually and collectively, are much more ambitious in their outlook

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<sup>4</sup> On the meeting and its resolutions, please see "Joint Communique Following the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the GCC-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum," *Media Note*, Office of the Spokesperson, New York, U.S. Department of State, September 25, 2014, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/232169.htm>

<sup>5</sup> See "Jeddah Communique," *Media Note*, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, U.S. Department of State, September 11, 2014, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/231496.htm>

<sup>6</sup> See "Final Communique from International Conference on Peace and Security in Iraq," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Washington, DC, September 15, 2014, at <http://www.cfr.org/counterterrorism/final-communique-international-conference-peace-security-iraq/p33442>

and equally much more capable and assertive. What this says is a matter of no small moment: the Gulf Cooperation Council is nowadays an economic powerhouse, a political entente of stable states, and a military power-projecting alliance proactively influencing events and doing whatever it can to defend its citizens and protect their legitimate interests. Except for the managed disturbances in Bahrain a few years ago, it is also, thus far, the only collective to have weathered the instability besetting polities elsewhere in the area and, among the Arab, Middle Eastern, and Islamic countries, the only one that can boast being a strategic ally and partner in regional and global affairs.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, GCC countries increased the degree to which they could administer their domestic security. In the process they practically eradicated the manifestation of violent domestic extremism, although the threat persists.<sup>7</sup> In 2002, Saudi Arabia zeroed in on the Arab world's oldest, largest, and most pervasive root cause of regional violence: namely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Then Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Aal Saud proposed an unprecedented, ground-breaking, far-reaching, and transformative Arab Peace Initiative. In its essence, theme, and focus, the Initiative sought to pave the way for long-lasting peace in the Middle East and redress the long-forgotten rights of the Palestinian people while assuring Israel's right to live in peace and security, provided that it withdraw from its illegally seized Palestinian and Syrian territories, and allow the establishment of East Jerusalem as the independent State of Palestine's capital.<sup>8</sup>

In the run-up to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and as National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations President and CEO, Dr. John Duke Anthony, writes, GCC member-countries' leaders cautioned American leaders against the invasion of Iraq. That the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush largely ignored the advice of its friends who counseled otherwise did much to impel most GCC leaders to consider the need to at least be open to the possibility of striking an independent stance from the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Since the early 2000s, a contingent of UAE troops has participated in humanitarian and security operations in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> In 2009, Saudi Arabia, representing the GCC's economic power, forced the formation of the G-20 to address the financial crisis gripping the world after the meltdown of U.S. financial institutions. Previously, GCC countries had been treated by Western and especially American Department of Treasury, economic, investment, and banking representatives as go-to financiers when things went bad and neglected when they improved.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On GCC countries fighting terrorism and piracy, see Frederick Wehrey, "Combatting Unconventional Threats in the Gulf," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 6, 2013, at <http://m.ceip.org/2013/12/06/combatting-unconventional-threats-in-gulf/h52r>

<sup>8</sup> "Arab Peace Initiative: Full Text," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2002, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/28/israel7>. See the fuller analysis of the initiative in John Duke Anthony, "Passing Brave: Crown Prince Abdullah's Peace Initiative," *Saudi-US Relations Information Service (SUSRIS)*, June 24, 2002, at <http://susris.com/2002/06/24/gulfwire-perspectives-june-24-2002/>

<sup>9</sup> John Duke Anthony, "Saudi Arabia-U.S. Relations Reconsidered," *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, October 31, 2013, at <http://ncusar.org/blog/2013/10/saudi-arabia-us-relations-reconsidered/>

<sup>10</sup> Frank Gardner, "Muslim Troops Help Win Afghan Minds," *BBC News*, March 28, 2008, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7318731.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7318731.stm)

<sup>11</sup> See Sven Behrendt, "The G20 and Saudi Arabia's Changing Foreign Policy Agenda," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Center*, September, 21, 2009, at <http://carnegie-mec.org/2009/09/21/g20-and-saudi-arabia-s-changing-foreign-policy-agenda>

In 2011, the Emirati and Qatari air forces were essential to the Arab League-UN-NATO mission to enforce U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect Libyan civilians from the onslaught of Muammar Qathafi's armed forces.<sup>12</sup> Since the withdrawal of the U.S. military from Iraq in 2011, the GCC has cautioned against Iran's interference and influence there, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's detrimental policies, and the resultant threats of extremist violence.

In all of these instances and more, the GCC has proven itself as an independent *entente* seeking its interests but acknowledging the agreed-upon rules and norms of peaceful international relations. As such, it may be warranted to state that the GCC today enters the renewed relationship with the United States almost entirely on its own terms, provided that it can maintain its cohesion and unity of purpose.

## 2) The Joint Efforts against ISIS

At a minimum, the active participation of most GCC states and Jordan in the American-led coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria gives the essential operation a local, Arab, and Muslim sanctioning that would obviate any criticism of yet another American war in the Middle East against the Islamic *ummah*.<sup>13</sup> In this, the GCC shows itself to be a leader not only in challenging the Islamic State and its barbaric vision and practices but also in buttressing Muslim efforts to de-legitimize the usurpers of Islam and its message. The GCC's participation also signifies its leaders' conviction that the responsibility to fight regional terrorism remains one of the most important policy choices for local and regional actors.<sup>14</sup>



***Aircraft taking part in strikes against Islamic State targets refuel over Iraq in October 2014. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense.***

Along with American assets, Saudi Arabian, Emirati, Qatari, and Bahraini aircraft form the backbone of the international coalition fighting the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>15</sup> Years of training and practice and state of the art flying equipment demonstrate that GCC forces have reached a level of professionalism and

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<sup>12</sup> Kareem Shaheen, "UAE fighter jets on the way to Libya," *The National*, March 26, 2011, at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/uae-fighter-jets-on-the-way-to-libya>

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Schulberg, "Five Arab Countries Are Supporting Obama's Strikes in Syria. What's Their Strategy?" *The New Republic*, September 23, 2014, at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119552/five-arab-countries-support-obamas-airstrikes-syria-heres-why>

<sup>14</sup> See Raghida Dergham, "The Gulf's Fight against ISIS and Its Confrontations with Iran," *Al-Arabiya English*, September 21, 2014, at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/09/21/The-Gulf-s-fight-against-ISIS-and-its-confrontations-with-Iran.html>

<sup>15</sup> For a day-by-day list of coalition operations in Iraq and Syria, see "Targeted Operations against ISIL Terrorists," *The Department of Defense*, at [http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814\\_iraq/](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/)

capabilities far beyond what previously existed.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, and challenging stereotypes about the positions and roles of women in Arab society, UAE female fighter pilot Major Mariam al-Mansouri has participated in assaults on ISIS positions in Syria.<sup>17</sup> Saudi Arabian ruling family members in the kingdom's air force participated in the assaults as well.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to bombing ISIS positions, GCC fighter aircraft may soon aid in fighting the organization in areas near Baghdad. ISIS fighters, having succeeded in asserting their control over areas of Anbar Province abutting the Saudi Arabian border, have advanced to a distance of 15 miles west of the Iraqi capital, raising questions about the extent to which the demoralized Iraqi army can be expected to arrest ISIS's advance, and resulting in American attack helicopters having to do much of the holding action to secure the capital.<sup>19</sup> GCC countries are not alone in being apprehensive of the threat ISIS poses in Baghdad, with the prospect of ensuing massacres there and to areas near the Saudi Arabian border, which if crossed, would almost certainly raise the context and nature of the conflict to an unprecedented level.

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rely on the Islamic Republic of Iran which, in Machiavellian fashion, could be expected to exploit the potential relationship for its own ends to the detriment of American and Arab interests. On the other hand, Turkey remains largely on the sidelines for reasons owing to having conflicting interests in the conflict's outcome and knowing that a single step could generate innumerable threats to its security. In its view of ISIS, Ankara seems only to see what Kurds might gain from its assistance were it to enter the fray, not the long-term benefits for the region as a whole.<sup>20</sup> It thus remains the responsibility of the GCC states to do what they can to fight the Islamic State and play as pivotal a role as possible in regional efforts to combat terrorism, assure peace, and maintain stability.

And since the start of joint operations against ISIS in the

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Garamone, "Joint Staff Director: Arab nations bring professionalism to ISIL fight," *DoD News*, September 25, 2014, at <http://www.centcom.mil/en/news/articles/joint-staff-director-arab-nations-bring-professionalism-to-isil-fight>

<sup>17</sup> Dana Ford, "UAE's first female fighter pilot led airstrike against ISIS," *CNN*, September 26, 2014, at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/25/world/meast/uae-female-fighter-pilot/>

<sup>18</sup> Ted Thornhill, "Saudi prince and Emirates' first female pilot lead the blitz on ISIS," *The Daily Mail*, September 25, 2014, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2769089/Saudi-prince-Emirate-s-female-pilot-lead-blitz-ISIS-Arab-states-send-squadrons-fighters-blast-terror-group-Iraq-Syria.html>

<sup>19</sup> "Dempsey: US used attack helicopters near Baghdad," *Seattle Times*, October 12, 2014, at [http://seattletimes.com/html/politics/2024762400\\_apxunitedstatesislamicstate.html?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=%2ASituation%20Report&utm\\_campaign=SitRep1013](http://seattletimes.com/html/politics/2024762400_apxunitedstatesislamicstate.html?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report&utm_campaign=SitRep1013)

<sup>20</sup> David Kenner, "What's Stopping Turkey from Saving Kobani?" *Foreign Policy*, October 10, 2014, at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/10/10/what\\_s\\_stopping\\_turkey\\_from\\_saving\\_kobani\\_islamic\\_state\\_kurds](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/10/10/what_s_stopping_turkey_from_saving_kobani_islamic_state_kurds)

second half of September, the strategic and military relationship between the United States – and its allies in the international coalition like the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Canada, Belgium- and the GCC states and others has progressed and cemented. The U.S.-chaired meeting of coalition military chiefs in Washington on October 14, 2014, attended by President Barack Obama, further signified a common interest and direction for the international effort. In consecrating the central role played by GCC militaries in fighting and defeating ISIS, the meeting thereby affirmed these countries having become the most important, decisive, and capable strategic American ally in the Arab world.<sup>21</sup>

### 3) The Slow Revival of U.S.-Egyptian Relations

The coolness that developed in U.S.-Egyptian relations since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011 was a major cause of concern for GCC countries. Despite some differences among the latter about the specifics of the Egyptian case, the GCC countries had long counted on Cairo as their strategic partner in an unstable environment. More particularly, they had prized the latter's special relationship with the United States during the era of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.<sup>22</sup> Washington's criticisms of the Egyptian army's move against former President Mohammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood exacerbated what many GCC governments saw as a callous American Administration unable to see the larger picture in terms of Egypt's strategic position and role not only in the Arab world but among Middle Eastern and Islamic countries in general.

But after numerous mixed signals by the United States, born mostly out of American confusion and miscalculations, the United States seems to have arrived at an understanding of, and with, Egypt that has surmounted previous trepidation. To this end, President Barack Obama met with Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi in New York in September and re-affirmed Egypt's centrality to U.S. and broader security in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> The United States has also released military aid to Egypt after suspending it in 2013<sup>24</sup> and approved the delivery of Apache attack helicopters to the Egyptian army.<sup>25</sup>



*Russian President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abd el-Fattah al-Sisi during al-Sisi's August 2014 visit to Russia. Photo: Russian Federation.*

What may also have helped the U.S. Administration change its stance regarding Egypt was the

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<sup>21</sup> Barbara Starr, "Obama to join defense heads for 22 nations on ISIS," *CNN*, October 14, 2014, at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/14/politics/defense-chiefs-isis/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> See Hussein Ibish, "GCC impasse is about the role Egypt plays in the region," *The National*, March 22, 2014, at <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/gcc-impasse-is-about-the-role-egypt-plays-in-region>

<sup>23</sup> "Obama says Egypt key to US security in Mideast," *Associated Press*, September 25, 2014, in *Al-Ahram English*, at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/111703/Egypt/Politics-/Obama-says-Egypt-key-to-US-security-in-Mideast.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> "U.S. unlocks military aid to Egypt, backing President Sisi," *BBC News*, June 22, 2014, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27961933>

<sup>25</sup> "U.S. to deliver 10 Apache helicopters to Egypt – Pentagon," *Reuters*, September 20, 2014, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/21/us-usa-egypt-apaches-idUSKBN0HG00920140921>

warming of relations between the latter and the Russian Federation. In February, 2014, Army Chief and Defense Minister, later President Abd el-Fattah al-Sisi, negotiated a U.S.\$2 billion Russian arms deal underwritten by Saudi Arabia.<sup>26</sup> As President, al-Sisi again visited Moscow in August, 2014, to negotiate deals for security and economic cooperation between the two countries.<sup>27</sup> With Russia bidding for friends in the Arab world and the Middle East in what seemed to be potentially at America's expense, the United States could not ignore the long-term challenge that a renewed Russian-Egyptian military relationship could pose to American interests in the region. Washington also understood that al-Sisi could not have made such a move without the support and encouragement of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who, in turn, would not have done what they did but for calculations related to Russia's position vis-à-vis Syria and Iran.

## Issues To be Ironed Out

As the U.S.-GCC strategic relationship continues to be revamped and strengthened, some important issues remain. Among them are matters where the United States and the GCC states' visions, objectives, and desires at least diverge. Given the centrality of the relationship to the interests of both parties and to the impact it has on third parties, such issues need to be addressed and dealt with effectively and quickly in light of fast-moving events, developments, and trends.

### 1) Syria

Since the start of Syria's civil war, the GCC states have sought a clearer American position than was initially enunciated by the Obama Administration. President Obama's repeated refrain that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has lost his legitimacy and must resign failed to satisfy Gulf leaders. The reason was that it was not accompanied by a clear and serious plan for the removal of Asad from power. The closest President Obama came to such a plan was his 'red line' threat if the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in its war against rebels.<sup>28</sup> In 2013, U.S. intelligence agencies found credible evidence of the use of such weapons near Damascus. Rather than carry out the implied threat of overthrowing the Assad government, the administration settled for an agreement on dismantling the country's chemical arsenal. Worthy as that was, it was viewed widely within the GCC as a betrayal of stated American positions and a loss of American credibility and position in the Middle East.<sup>29</sup>

President Obama's decision, and the U.S. Congress's approval, of funding, training, and arming of 5,000 members of a Syrian opposition force in Saudi Arabia was only the beginning of a GCC wish-list. In the eyes of numerous GCC analysts, a more effective strategy to end Asad's rule would also include the establishment of no-fly zones over parts of Syrian territory ceded by the Syrian regime and efforts within such zones to help build alternate state institutions. However, fulfilling such a

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<sup>26</sup> "Egypt negotiates arms deal with Russia as Putin backs Sisi presidential bid," *Agence France Press*, in *al-Akhbar English*, February 13, 2014, at <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18614>

<sup>27</sup> "Egypt's al-Sisi Visits Russia to Discuss Middle East Security and Cooperation with Russia's Putin," *MSNBC*, August 12, 2014, at <http://nbcnews.com/2014/08/12/egypts-al-sisi-visits-moscow-discuss-middle-east-security-putin/>

<sup>28</sup> "Obama warns Syria not to cross 'red line'," *CNN*, August 21, 2012, at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/20/world/meast/syria-unrest/>

<sup>29</sup> See, *inter alia*, Theodore Karasik, "Where does the Gulf stand on the Syria chemical deal?" *Al-Arabiyya English*, September 19, 2013, at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/09/19/Where-does-the-Gulf-stand-on-the-Syria-chemical-deal-.html>

wish would not be. It would entail, *inter alia*, disabling the Syrian air defense system, a multi-billion dollar Russian strategic investment, which, in and of itself, could provoke counter hostile acts by Moscow, thereby potentially torpedoing American interests in avoiding further disagreements with the Russian Federation.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the goal of helping to build alternate state institutions in areas free of Asad's rule is also fraught with difficulty. For example, such an effort will minimally require a unified moderate Syrian opposition that so far has not been able to impose its control anywhere. In essence, what some GCC states allegedly want from the U.S. administration may simply be unattainable at present and thus may have to be modified or abandoned altogether.

## 2) Iran

While GCC states are pleased with the latest and renewed American commitment to their strategic stability, their leaders understandably continue to worry about the potential trajectory of U.S. relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The degree of the GCC's trepidation remains a function of the continuing negotiations between Tehran and the P5+1, since a nuclear deal would have



***U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif of Iran while watched by Baroness Catherine Ashton of the European Union before sitting down in Vienna, Austria, in November 2014, for a three-way discussion about the future of Iran's nuclear program. Photo: U.S. Department of State.***

direct impacts on Iran's ability to be free of international constraints and sanctions. Importantly, a nuclear deal, if accompanied or followed by an American rapprochement with Iran will most assuredly recognize Iran as a central player in the Arabian Gulf. Such a result, in turn, would likely enhance the prospects for Iran being able to further its influence wherever it now has friends - Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen - and possibly gain inroads elsewhere. In the perception of the GCC states, such an outcome would fail to negatively impact the renewed GCC-U.S. partnership and the GCC's regional strategic outlook and confidence.<sup>31</sup>

Specifically, a P5+1 opening on Iran without first dealing with the Syrian crisis to the GCC's satisfaction, or without securing a modicum of Iranian withdrawal from its role in shoring up the Asad government, would necessarily mean that the

Islamic Republic paid no price for such a rapprochement. Concomitantly, leaving Lebanon hostage

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<sup>30</sup> On the no-fly zone, see Kate Brannen, "Blackmail in the Buffer Zone," *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2014, at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/10/15/blackmail\\_in\\_the\\_buffer\\_zone\\_turkey\\_syria\\_isis](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/10/15/blackmail_in_the_buffer_zone_turkey_syria_isis)

<sup>31</sup> For the latest GCC criticism of Iranian behavior and policy, see Abdullah al-Shihri, "Saudi minister blasts Iran's 'occupying forces' as 'part of the problem' in Syria, Iraq and Yemen," *Associated Press*, in *National Post*, October 13, 2014, at <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/10/13/saudi-minister-blasts-irans-occupying-forces-as-part-of-the-problem-in-syria-iraq-and-yemen/>. For a deeper, more contextual, and nuanced analysis of the strategic dynamics of GCC-Iran relations, see John Duke Anthony, "Strategic Dynamics in Iran-GCC Relations," in Jean-Francois Seznec and Mimi Kirk, eds., *Industrialization in the Gulf: A socioeconomic revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 78-102 (also at *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, May 11, 2012, at <http://ncusar.org/blog/2012/05/strategic-dynamics-of-iran-gcc-relations/>), and John Duke Anthony, "War with Iran: Regional Reactions and Requirements," *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, September 4, 2012, at <http://ncusar.org/blog/2012/09/war-with-iran/>

to Iran's strategic calculations and Hezbollah's grip on the country's governance and its continued involvement in Syria would strengthen Iran's strategic reach to the Mediterranean. In Iraq, allowing the continued Iranian chokehold on large segments of the country's politics and society would effectively confirm Iran's extended borders to those of the GCC. As the GCC sees it, the change from Nouri al-Maliki's heavily-sectarian politics, welcome as it is, does not in and of itself necessarily limit Shiite Iran's threat, new Iraqi Premier, Haidar al-Abadi's openness and assurances notwithstanding.

In Yemen, the latest expansion of the Iranian-backed Zaidi Houthis and their conquest of the capital in Sana'a could be seen as the clearest example of Iranian designs and meddling in the country's affairs. It also represents a potentially existential threat to the southern underbelly of the GCC system. Iranian President Hasan Rouhani has declared that the Houthi victories to date have been 'brave and significant' while Iranian Supreme Leader Adviser Ali Reza Zakani, has boasted that the Houthi move assured Iranian control over four Arab capitals – Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana'a.<sup>32</sup>

The Houthis' takeover of Sana'a means at least three things to the GCC states. First, it provided proof that Tehran has been supportive of the putsch. Second, it increased the alliance's anxiety about being surrounded by a Shiite pincer-movement to the north, west, and south. And third, it has renewed fears about threats to Yemen's Red Sea lanes since the Houthis will control the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which is the Southern Red Sea Gateway to the Suez Canal. As Rouhani is said to represent the moderate elements in the Iranian clerical regime, GCC states may not be in error in having reason to believe that the bulk of the Iranian political class is plotting against them. U.S. involvement and assistance in achieving an outcome in Yemen favorable to GCC and by extension American needs, concerns, and interests is thus an important element of augmenting the GCC's strategic outlook and position.

## Future Expectations, Potentials, and Contingencies

Going forward, GCC-U.S. relations are expected to show rigorous attempts at correcting for missed opportunities and unfortunate misunderstandings. Given the GCC's outlook after years of capacity building and actual achievements, it is expected that the relationship will see additional avenues for cooperation and coordination. An abiding reason is twofold: one, that the United States is likely to remain the region's leading economic and military superpower, and two, the GCC is destined to continue to play an essential role in international economics and political developments.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Gulf states urge Yemen to safeguard its sovereignty, as Houthis head for oil pipeline," *Middle East Eye*, October 2, 2014, at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-1192480538>

<sup>33</sup> Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, address to the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference, Washington, D.C., October 28-29, 2014, at <http://ncusar.org/auspc/2014#gcc>. Also see John Duke Anthony, "From Arabia to Asia: Does a Policy Shift Make Sense?" *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, February 18, 2014, at <http://ncusar.org/blog/2014/02/from-arabia-to-asia-does-a-policy-shift-make-sense/>; John Duke Anthony, "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Deep Rifts and Emerging Challenges," Statement to the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representative, Washington, D.C., May 22, 2014, at <http://ncusar.org/blog/2014/05/gcc-deepening-rifts-emerging-challenges/>; John Duke Anthony, "Saudi Arabia-U.S. Relations Reconsidered," op. cit.; and John Duke Anthony, "The Future Significance of the Gulf Cooperation Council," in *Global Strategic Developments: A Futuristic Vision* (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and research, 2012), pp. 63-103 (also at <http://ncusar.org/pubs/2012/04/future-significance-gcc/>).

One thing will become increasingly obvious as the relationship develops and the partnership endures: the GCC will progressively assert a more independent course in the service of its interests, even if these dictate some disagreements with American policy preferences. On the other hand, the enduring relationship is potentially going to witness American attempts at involving the GCC – as an alliance – in more political and economic decisions that influence developments and outcomes beyond the immediate Middle East environment. The establishment of the G-20 a few years ago was definitely a step in the GCC’s assumption of a larger international role. The role, as was evident in the G-20 meeting in Brisbane, Australia, on November 15-16, 2014, is one that may allow the GCC an unprecedented array of input and comment regarding decisions related to international war and peace issues, health crises, natural disasters, and others.

As an economic bloc, the GCC will be given an extraordinary opportunity to become a political leader in world affairs. This task alone will naturally require that the GCC member-countries continue their drives toward sustainable development. Militarily, and as participating in Libya, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon, and against ISIS has shown, the GCC is potentially going to play a larger *regional* role in the service of peace and security in the Arabian Gulf and its environs.

But just as essentially, the GCC has little choice but to be cognizant of the challenges that might hinder its ability to be at once a partner in an important strategic relationship and an active member in helping to address regional and international issues. Namely, the GCC must strive toward a working formula for the members’ proposed union that would secure the members equally assured benefits, a gradual transformation to more open and participatory governance, an affirmation of its commitment to help alleviate economic hardships in the Arab world, a continued commitment to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, and an agenda for continued development and membership in the community of peaceful nations.

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