

# A DISCUSSION WITH GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARY GENERAL DR. ABDUL LATIF AL ZAYANI

*The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its six member-countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – could hardly have been more in the news in late-September and early-October 2015.*

*First, as noted in the analysis and assessment that follows, there was the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' meeting with and briefing by His Excellency Dr. Abdul Latif Bin Rashid Al Zayani, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, on September 18, 2015. National Council Founding President and CEO Dr. John Duke Anthony, the only American to have been invited to attend each and every GCC Ministerial and Heads of State Summit since the GCC's establishment in 1981, presided, provided context, background, and perspective, and moderated the discussion and question and answer period.*



**GCC Secretary General Dr. Abdul Latif Bin Rashid Al Zayani addresses a meeting organized by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and its U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee on September 18, 2015, in Washington, DC.  
Photo: National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations.**

*Second, the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the GCC-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum was held in New York on September 30, 2015, in conjunction with the opening of the 70th United Nations General Assembly. According to the Joint Communique following the meeting, the discussion examined issues including “the humanitarian and political crisis in Syria, the importance of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1 and Iran, the Middle East peace process, and the need for a political solution to the conflict in Yemen.”*

*Third, was the National Council's standing-room-only October 6 meeting with and briefing by HRH*

Navy Captain (Ret.) Prince Sultan bin Khalid Al-Faisal Al Sa'ud in The Gold Room of the Rayburn Building of the U.S. Congress' House of Representatives. In the ninety-minute meeting, Dr. Anthony provided an introductory overview of Saudi Arabia's position and role in regional and global affairs and led a spirited discussion session following HRH Prince Sultan's remarks.

HRH Prince Sultan outlined his views, analyses, and assessments of Saudi Arabia's heightened assertiveness on the national and regional defense fronts. Upon the conclusion of his remarks, the Prince fielded close to thirty questions. HRH Prince Sultan's address, Dr. Anthony's remarks, and the Prince's response to questions will be posted to the Council's website by the end of the week.

Fourth, only two hours after the National Council's program on Capitol Hill, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Senator Robert "Bob" Corker from Tennessee, conducted a hearing on "The U.S. Role and Strategy in the Middle East: Yemen and the Countries of the Gulf Cooperation



**H.E. Dr. Abdul Latif Al Zayani, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, addresses a meeting of the United Nations Security Council concerning the situation in Yemen in September 2013. Photo: United Nations.**

Council." Accompanied by six of his fellow Senators, he did so in the context of, among other things, President Obama's summit with the representatives of all six GCC countries this past May at Camp David. Committee members also examined the GCC countries' leadership in the ten-nation coalition fighting to restore the legitimate government of Yemeni President Hadi.

In addition, the members asked questions about where the United States and the GCC countries stand with regard not only to the conflict in Yemen. They also voiced

their concerns about the situation in Syria and the respective approaches by Washington officialdom, on one hand, and the capitals of the GCC countries, on the other, to the challenges that an assertive and increasingly emboldened Iran poses to the region's peace, security, and stability.

A recurring issue was GCC countries' perception of a U.S. disengagement from the region, which American officials, with mixed success to date, have been at pains to deny. Coupled to this issue is what many in the GCC believe is an unspoken American intention to increase the position and role of Iran's involvement in the region. Were such an eventuality to occur, numerous among the GCC's analysts are of the view that it could come only at the GCC region's expense.

*Two outstanding resource specialists, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Mary Beth Long and former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Stephen Seche, delivered statements and fielded questions from the Senators for two hours. Their respective testimonies along with a video of the Hearing are available on the Foreign Relations Committee website.*

*All four of these developments serve to underscore the timeliness and relevance of GCC Secretary General Al Zayani's following analyses and assessments at the National Council's meeting and briefing.*

\*\*\*\*\*

# **A DISCUSSION WITH GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARY GENERAL H.E. DR. ABDUL LATIF BIN RASHID AL ZAYANI**

On Friday, September 18, 2015, the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and the Council's U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee convened an informal seminar with GCC Secretary General Dr. Abdul Latif Bin Rashid Al Zayani. Present, in addition to GCC ambassadors to the United States, were national security, defense, and other foreign affairs analysts and practitioners as well as scholars and select graduate students from area universities.

Dr. Al Zayani's remarks focused on issues and interests of current and ongoing importance to the GCC and its six member-countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In a private meeting later with National Council President and CEO Dr. John Duke Anthony, the Secretary General agreed that the following summarization of his key points and perspectives could be published in keeping with the Council's educational mission.

## **The GCC and The EU: Similarities and Differences**

To that end, Dr. Anthony provided background, context, and perspective for the Secretary General's remarks. He emphasized, first, that a helpful frame of reference for understanding the GCC is that it is often compared, sometimes accurately, sometimes incorrectly, to the European Union (EU).

The comparison, he said, is at once fair and unfair. It is fair, albeit superficially, Dr. Anthony said, in the sense that the founding members of both organizations were the same in number: six countries.

They are also similar, he stated, in another way: namely, in the GCC's leaders having indicated how the EU is among the most relevant and

pertinent of interstate organizations to which the GCC's needs, concerns, interests, and key foreign policy objectives might, in the view of many GCC representatives, be modeled.

And in yet another way, he continued, comparisons to the EU are in various ways fair in the sense that the EU is the one organization from which the GCC might derive the greatest benefit. One such benefit, he said, would be in terms of the lessons the EU offers as to how far and how fast the GCC might proceed in light of the EU's efforts at interstate cooperation to date.

But comparisons between the GCC and the EU can also be unfair and misleading, Dr. Anthony said. As an example, he cited the circumstances of the two organizations' founding.



Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan speaks to reporters during a break at the inaugural GCC Summit in Abu Dhabi, UAE, in May 1981. Photo: Dr. John Duke Anthony.

First, the EU was founded among peoples who had previously bonded psychologically as a result of their lives, economies, and indeed whole societies having been shattered and devastated by the Second World War. No remotely similar facilitative situation, he pointed out, existed in the GCC region at the time of the member-states'

founding.

Second, the pre-existence of a robust interstate economic organization – namely, the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951 – played an important role in helping to facilitate the EU's establishment. It demonstrated tangibly what the benefits could be from enhanced interstate trade, investment, and technology cooperation. No such comparable entity existed prior to the founding of the GCC. Indeed, the reality was nearer the opposite. For example, if measured by the primary sources of their respective national incomes and the direction of their exports, the GCC's would-be members traded more with countries beyond the region than they did with each other.

Third, providing a solid and secure protective backbone to the EU's founding was the Marshall Plan that facilitated Western Europe's reconstruction and economic development, and in which the United States was the central player and partner. In contrast, no comparable foreign economic assistance scheme or external intraregional development partner linked the six countries that would forge the GCC.

Fourth, was the military reality of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO was comprised of most of the same countries as the Marshall Plan program countries, in which the United States was not only a full-fledged but, indeed, leading member. Again in contrast, despite a full-fledged war being waged at the time between neighboring Iran and Iraq, no similar defense treaty arrangement or organization existed when the GCC was born and one does not exist to this date.

That the GCC came into being despite not having



Foreign Ministers of the GCC countries meet on the sidelines of the 10th GCC Summit in Muscat, Oman, in 1989.  
Photo: Dr. John Duke Anthony.

these four extraordinary benefits to provide the GCC leaders confidence and assurance that their endeavor would last, let alone succeed, is a matter of no small moment. Indeed, from a clinical, detached, and objective assessment, the GCC's establishment, survival, and continuous development in the midst of the challenges it has had to confront and endure is nothing short of remarkable, unprecedented, and an acknowledged example of politics being the art of the possible.

The evidence: the GCC has thus far lasted 34 years and counting. No other Arab sub-regional organization has had its foreign ministers meet as regularly – four times a year. No other Arab sub-regional organization has had as many

meetings – in the hundreds – among the six countries' specialized committees.

No other Arab sub-regional organization's leaders have participated in a special summit with the President of the United States, as occurred this past May at Camp David. No other Arab sub-regional organization – not the Arab Maghreb Organization, not the Arab Cooperative Council, nor the Arab Military Industries Organization, the Confederation of Arab Republics, the Hashemite Federation, or the Wahda [the Union of Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961] – has come close.

Adding to what Dr. Anthony provided by way of background, context, and perspective, Dr. Al Zayani said that the GCC has proceeded with

full knowledge of the previous experiences and difficulties faced by other Arab regional and sub-regional organizations, and various Arab world efforts at regional cooperation or integration.

What distinguishes the GCC at the present time, he said, is not that which differentiates them from other international sub-regional organizations. Rather, it is the range of issues that most concern the member-states: namely, terrorism, Syria, Iran, and Yemen.

## **Terrorism**

Regarding terrorism, the Secretary General noted how the broader region in which the GCC is situated has become increasingly dangerous. The reason, he emphasized, is one that previously did not exist: its ability to attract, import, and sustain foreign fighters.

“Here,” Dr. Al Zayani said, “context is important. Indeed, if one were to step back and try to evaluate from afar the strengths and benefits of the GCC-U.S. strategic partnership, what would be important not to overlook is that the GCC has always called for cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

“To that end, as early as May 2005, we called for the establishment of a Center for Counter-Terrorism. Indeed, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah pledged \$110 million to help finance the inauguration of such a center whose sole purpose would be to study ways to counter terrorism.

## **Da’esh, Youth, and Arab Education**

“In the GCC’s and the United States’ meetings

and discussions to date, we have agreed that Da’esh (Arabic for the Islamic State group that has captured and is administering large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria) is the single greatest challenge for us both.

“In our efforts to counter its effects, however, we need to ask ourselves: ‘How did this happen?’ And what does Da’esh’s origins and staying power say about the nature, extent, and effectiveness of our information- and intelligence-sharing?

“Can we not say the truth, that it was a combination of the after-effects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and later Syria’s civil war, which commenced in 2011, that allowed and indeed enabled the expansion of terrorism and the creation and spread of Da’esh to occur?

“Does not this conflict and its origins shed light on how Da’esh’s leaders since 2014 have been able to declare their establishment of a global caliphate?

“As to what is being done to confront the challenge that Da’esh represents, one of the joint GCC-United States responses to this challenge has been the forging of an international coalition in which the GCC and the United States are working side by side as partners.

“But it is not enough for each of us to agree that Da’esh will eventually be defeated. Nor is it sufficient for the two of us to acknowledge what at the end of the day is but a truism: that victory can be had only if the concerned parties continue to work hard and strengthen their efforts within the coalition.

“As important if not more so is for us to ask ourselves the following question: ‘When we defeat Da’esh, how will we ensure that another

Da'esh does not rise in its place?'

“While we are fighting Da'esh, we have to continue recognizing that the challenges we face are at once not just military and counter-terrorism ones. They are also regional; they are humanitarian; they are infrastructural.

“In this regard, in what way and to what extent are we thinking about the political conflict that may ensue in Syria after the defeat of Da'esh? And how can we shorten the transition period from chaos and conflict to a stabilized country?

“More fundamentally, we need to ask ourselves another question: ‘What role can education play in helping combat terrorism?’ Can we not see how easy it has become for terrorists to appeal to and attract many of our disillusioned youth?

“Finally, we also need to focus on the media. We need to ask how the media might be inspired to be more responsible in the way it treats the issue of violent extremism and its appeal to young people.

## Iran: Concerns and Consternation

“In these regards, it is important to underscore the series of meetings between the GCC and its American counterparts this past year. In the process, both sides have pledged their continued cooperation in the areas of intelligence sharing.

“Each side has re-committed to the continuation of working together to counter terrorism. And

both sides are more and more joined at the hip, so to speak, to doing what we can collectively, jointly, and individually to prevent Iranian expansionism.

“As to Iran specifically, all of the GCC countries have voiced their approval of the recent nuclear agreement reached between Tehran and the five UN Security Council Permanent Members and Germany, the so-called P5+1.

“Each of the GCC’s member states has acknowledged and voiced support for Iran’s right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

“But our problems with Iran are not so much its nuclear program. Rather, they stem from its ongoing interference in the domestic affairs of what are quintessentially Arab – not Iranian – affairs.

“Currently, we face a twofold question in this regard for which, thus far, we haven’t the answers. The first is whether, once it receives the multi-billion dollar windfall from the end of sanctions, Iran will use its newfound wealth internally.

“Were it to do so, it would have our wholehearted approval, for we support the goal of the Iranian people becoming more prosperous. What we will not support, however, is Tehran’s use of its funds to continue and possibly increase the extent to which it has been interfering in our societies.

“Our second concern with Iran has to do with the sanctions. What will happen in the event Teheran

## *When we defeat Da'esh, how will we ensure that another Da'esh does not rise in its place?*



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry listens to opening statements at a meeting about the Iranian nuclear deal with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Doha, Qatar, on August 3, 2015. Photo: U.S. Department of State.

fails to comply with the requirements it has undertaken to uphold and implement under the terms of the nuclear agreement?

“Should Iran fail to do so, what then? How, if at all, will it be possible for the sanctions to “snap back” if Iran fails to adhere to the nuclear agreement?

“But our concerns with Iran also derive from its continued illegal occupation and control of three UAE islands: Abu Musa, which belongs to the UAE Emirate of Sharjah, and the two Tunbs Islands, Greater and Lesser, which belong to the UAE Emirate of Ra’s Al-Khaimah.

“Iran seized these three islands illegally by force

on December 1, 1971. In all the years since then, the UAE, backed since the establishment of the GCC in 1981, has sought to resolve the conflict peacefully, diplomatically, and legally.

“To this day, however, Tehran has refused to accommodate each and all of the UAE’s and the GCC’s overtures. The overtures have included the UAE’s willingness to submit to and be bound by any judgment rendered by the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

*What we will not support is Tehran’s use of its funds to continue and possibly increase the extent to which it has been interfering in our societies.*

“Instead, Iran has moved not only to fortify the islands in dispute, which lay near the middle of the main entrance and exit routes of the maritime traffic transiting the waters of

Arabia and the Gulf. Tehran has for years also demanded that the Arab inhabitants of the Island of Abu Musa obtain an Iranian visa in order to travel back and forth to the places on the island where previously they had for decades lived and worked.

“One need add to this issue Iran’s incessant support for the armed Lebanese Shi’ite militia and political party, Hezbollah. Even biased and pro-Hezbollah analysts in Lebanon do not deny that Iran’s support is the central reason for Lebanon’s lack of a constitutionally-elected president for years on end. This is in addition to the position and role that Hezbollah, with its Iranian backers, is playing in support of the regime of Syria’s Bashar Al-Assad, which shows

no signs of ending or even any serious indications of abatement.

“This gives us little reason to anticipate that the near term ahead is likely to be any different. Certainly this is the case when we continue to hear in recent statements attributed to the Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Khamenehi, that Iran has every intention of continuing to export its Revolution. And it is the same when, without stating it in so many words, Iran’s leaders continue their support for proxy wars that lie to the north, south, and northwest of the GCC region.

“It hardly needs emphasizing that in the event Iran continues its interference in the domestic affairs of Arab countries, however near to or far



On April 14, 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2216, imposing sanctions on individuals it said were undermining the stability of Yemen. Photo: United Nations.

from the GCC countries its interferences may be, this will have the exact opposite effect of what is needed most urgently, which is that this region should be safe.

“What all this comes down to is not that difficult to conceive or understand.

At root of our issues of concern regarding Iran is a matter as fundamental as anyone can imagine in terms of its relationship to peace, safety, security, and prosperity: namely trust. It turns on trust.

## Yemen

“The GCC has long been involved in important issues involving Yemen and vice versa. Indeed, it was the GCC Initiative in 2011 that led to the call for the United Nations, under Chapter Eight of the UN Charter, which followed up with passage by the UN Security Council of Resolution 2216, which seeks to put into place appropriate measures to help the Yemeni people.

“In this context, the GCC played a prominent role in creating the means for a peaceful transition in Yemen’s national leadership. Things were moving smoothly, including the convening of a National Dialogue Conference in 2014, in which the Houthis themselves were represented. However, extremists with weapons sabotaged the process and led to the exile of President Hadi.

“We are of course anxious to see how the United Nations and Great Power countries such as the

United States can assist in bringing security, peace, and stability to Yemen.

“As it is, in the manner in which other countries and no less than three major international organizations – the Arab League, the GCC, and



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Under Secretary for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman participate in a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting on the sidelines of the 70th Regular Session of the UN General Assembly in New York, New York, on September 30, 2015. Photo: U.S. Department of State.

the United Nations – have become engaged in the Yemen situation one way or another is vivid proof of how interdependent the world has become.

“Yet Yemen is but one topic of importance within the GCC-U.S. Strategic Dialogue. And it is important to note that the Dialogue did not commence with the May 2015 Camp David Summit in which President Obama met with the representatives of the six GCC countries. The Dialogue predates the summit.

## Intra-GCC Dynamics

“The GCC-U.S. Strategic Dialogue has not supplanted the six bilateral relationships that

the United States has with the individual GCC members. Because it is in the interests of the respective parties, both are occurring simultaneously.

“Under the umbrella or rubric of the Dialogue, we have created six working groups. The groups deal with such matters as logistics, equipment, and maritime piracy, with regard to which America’s Fifth Fleet continues to monitor extensively.

“Thanks to the combined efforts of the International Task Force and the intervention of Oman with the Somali families, whose sons were engaged in activities that threatened international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and further offshore in the Indian Ocean, the frequency of piracy has plummeted.

“The GCC and the United States have also established an emergency response center, a joint maritime center, and a joint air defense center, all three of which seek to enhance the nature and degree of cooperation among our respective armed forces.

“Here, again, context is important. Indeed, all these achievements have occurred within the past two years. And while the longer standing pan-GCC agreements to administer a common external tariff and a customs union have remained elusive of achievement to date, we are closer than before in surmounting the remaining obstacles.

“This is in addition to GCC citizens being entitled to free education from kindergarten through university in all six of the member-countries regardless of the country in which the GCC citizen may have originated – and not just free higher education but also free health care,

again, regardless of wherever one might be and regardless of the GCC country in which one may have been born.

“GCC citizens also have guaranteed access to favorable housing arrangements regardless of where they might be within the GCC region, in addition to no personal income taxes and the right to employment in any of the countries other than their own.

“Finally, we are still working to unify and harmonize our legislative enactments. Thus far we have unified 40 laws with more to come. Altogether there are 110 laws that are in the process of being unified. And what many have not been noticed is that we have implemented 93 per cent of the decisions that have been made in this regard.

“In short, the GCC and its Secretariat have hardly been idle. The Secretariat alone has hosted some 700 meetings among the representatives of countless working groups.

“Each GCC working group has as its members one representative each of the respective GCC country’s ministry that stands to be most directly affected by whatever a given working group is tasked with addressing, administering, or resolving.”

## **Continued GCC-U.S. Strategic Oneness**

Regarding the longstanding strategic importance of the GCC region to the United States, the GCC Secretary General, who is from Bahrain, underscored the value of the GCC to its citizens, the region as a whole, and to the world at large, adding that the benefits have turned not just on

the size of population or territorial extent of this or that GCC member-country, but rather, on the member-states' positions and roles.

Bahrain, for example, the Secretary General emphasized, is a GCC country that is territorially smaller than any of the others but one that has nonetheless often made, and indeed continues to make, contributions to regional security, safety, peace, and prosperity to a degree far greater than its territorial expanse or population size would indicate is possible.

In this regard, the Secretary General mused, "One would do well to recall what Rear Admiral William Crowe" – who early in his career was posted to Bahrain – "said about the first American ships that from 1949 onwards were and to this day have continued to be anchored in Bahrain.

"Admiral Crowe wrote, 'Bahrain, pound for pound, is the best friend of America in the region.'

"And he might have added that this was achieved without any agreement."

\*\*\*\*\*

*His Excellency Dr. Abdul Latif Bin Rashid Al Zayani has served as Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council since April 2011.*