

Destabilization in the Gulf Region and for the GCC

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Iran’s ambitions to dominate the Middle East directly imperil GCC security and stability. Relations between Washington and the GCC were strained as a result of the former’s efforts to reach an accommodation with Iran over its illicit nuclear program. The U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal offers U.S. policymakers an opportunity to renew U.S.-GCC cooperation to constrain Iran’s hegemonic ambitions.

Genesis of the GCC

Concerns over Iran’s aggressive expansionist goals were the driving factor behind the 1981 creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional political, economic and security alliance comprised of six Arab monarchies – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. As the most populous and wealthy GCC nation, Saudi Arabia stands as the bloc’s de facto leader.

The GCC is principally aligned with Washington as its major-power patron, and relies on the U.S. for major arms sales and informal security commitments. The U.S. has maintained a robust military presence in the Persian Gulf since the 1970s in order to guarantee the flow of Gulf oil to the rest of the world and several of the GCC member states, like Qatar and Bahrain, host large U.S. military installations. An American military presence has further served as a constraint on Iran’s imperial ambitions and prevented the outbreak of outright hostilities between Iran and GCC countries.

The maintenance of regional stability is a core goal of the conservative monarchies of the GCC. Given the substantial Shi’a minorities in several of its member states, namely Saudi Arabia – which has a

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sizeable Shi'a minority concentrated mainly in its oil-rich Eastern Province, Bahrain – whose 70-75 percent Shi'a majority is ruled by a Sunni monarchy – and Kuwait – whose Shi'a population stands at 33 percent – the GCC states are especially sensitive to Iranian attempts to stoke sectarian tensions. Such efforts have only intensified following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the 2011 Arab Spring, and the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

It should be noted that there are numerous political and ideological differences among the GCC's members which has at times posed a stumbling block to the formation of a unified front against Iran. Most notably, Qatar, which shares the world's largest gas field with Iran, and Oman, which has pursued a strategy of maintaining positive relations with all neighboring powers, have both pursued independent tracks while remaining within the GCC framework. Qatar and Oman have emphasized trade and commercial links to Iran while overlooking its ideological threat to the region. It has also helped that there has been little unrest among these nations' small Shi'a minorities.

The Historical Basis of Iranian-Saudi Enmity



Khobar Tower Bombing: Saleh Rifai/AP Photo

Ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen are emblematic of the larger geopolitical struggle waged between Iran and Saudi Arabia for decades. Iran's influence has grown in these conflict zones, often at the expense of Saudi Arabia.

Iran's attempts to exacerbate internal sectarian divides, foment unrest and topple the GCC monarchies dates back to the establishment of the Islamic Republic following the 1979 revolution. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, claimed that hereditary monarchies such as the GCC states were illegitimate under Islam, and sought to become not just the leader of Iran, but of

the entire Islamic world, threatening Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites.

Khomeini began stoking tensions with Saudi Arabia immediately after taking power by backing Shi'a militias and political parties throughout the Middle East. The majority-Shi'a city of Qatif, home to several of the Kingdom's largest oil fields, refineries, and processing facilities, was beset by unrest and mobilization against the monarchy following the overthrow of the Shah in Iran.

The most vivid expression of Iran's direct challenge to the Saudi regime's legitimacy was the [political activism undertaken by Iranian pilgrims](#) during the annual hajj beginning in 1979. Growing increasingly more radical over time, Iranian pilgrims sought to propagandize and proselytize at the hajj, spreading the principles of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution directly to the pilgrims of other nationalities. In 1981, Iranian pilgrims staged large demonstrations and chanted political slogans at the Great Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, sparking violent clashes with Saudi security services.

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The building tensions over the hajj came to a head in 1987. The atmosphere was particularly charged that year following the introduction of U.S. naval forces into the Gulf. On July 31, 1987, Iranian Revolutionary Guard operatives provoked Iranian pilgrims to riot outside the Grand Mosque in Mecca during the pilgrimage. As 155,000 Iranian pilgrims chanted [“death to America”](#) and confronted Saudi riot police, a stampede ensued. As a result, more than 400 people died, including hundreds of Iranian pilgrims and Saudi policemen. “Khomeini responded indignantly to the incident, labeling the Saudi rulers a “band of heretics” and declaring, “These vile and ungodly Wahhabis are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back.”

Iran’s interference in Saudi affairs continued to expand throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Iranian-backed Hezbollah served as the tip of the spear for Iran’s meddling. Attacks were carried out on the Saudi petrochemical industry and targeted assassinations of Saudi politicians took place worldwide. A plot involving explosives placed near Mecca’s Great Mosque was uncovered and stopped. On June 25, 1996, Saudi Hezbollah bombed the Khobar Towers housing compound in Dhahran where U.S. and allied forces supporting air operations in Iraq were housed, killing 19 American servicemen and injuring hundreds of others.

Iran’s Recent Destabilizing Regional Activities



IRGC Harassment: AP Photo

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s principal foreign policy objectives center on exporting its Islamic Revolution and supplanting the United States as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East. Iran has employed terrorist proxies and fomented unrest among Shi’a minority populations in pursuing its hegemonic ambitions, which have inflamed sectarian tensions and destabilized the region. Tehran now wields significant influence over four Arab capitals – Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Sanaa – but in the process has contributed to a global refugee crisis.

Iran’s hand can be clearly seen in all of the region’s conflict zones, as it has exploited the region’s popular uprisings and civil wars in its desire to establish a “Shi’a crescent” of influence. The Gulf nations have largely weathered the Iran-fueled breakdown of the regional order, while viewing the carnage and increased sectarian tensions as a threat to their own regimes’ survival. Iran’s military spending is much lower than the GCC’s expenditures—[according to one analysis, GCC states spent \\$95 to \\$128 billion in 2017 vs. Iran, which spent \\$15 to \\$16 billion](#)—yet Iran has been able to increase its regional influence through effective, low-cost methods such as anchoring loyal terrorist proxies in neighboring countries – which it has done in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza – and subversive outreach to Shi’a populations throughout the region.

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Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's historically fraught relationship with Iran reached new lows during the last few years. After Saudi Arabia executed an outspoken Shi'a cleric with ties to Iran, an Iranian mob chanting "Death to the Al Saud family," ransacked and set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The incident led Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain to recall their ambassadors from Tehran, and the UAE to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Iran. In May 2017, Saudi Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman stated that Iran's extremist theology precludes the GCC states and Iran from reaching an accommodation. "How do you have a dialogue with a regime built on an extremist ideology ... which [says] they must control the land of Muslims and spread their Twelver Jaafari sect in the Muslim world?" asked bin Salman.

Recently, Iran has targeted Saudi Arabia through the Houthis in Yemen using missiles and drones. For instance, [according](#) to the Congressional Research Service, the Houthis have been firing a Burkan short-range ballistic missile into Saudi Arabia since 2016. The latest version of this missile is the Burkan-2H—which, [according](#) to U.S. officials, is an Iranian-manufactured Qaim missile—and was launched "[deep](#)" into Saudi territory in November 2017. The Houthis have also targeted Saudi tankers in the Red Sea—causing Riyadh to suspend oil shipments through the Red Sea in late July 2018. Likewise, in May 2019, the Houthis claimed responsibility for using seven armed drones to [attack](#) Saudi oil infrastructure.

Bahrain

Iran's revolutionary regime's meddling in Bahrain, which Iranian officials have referred to as Iran's "[14th province](#)," dates as far back as 1981, when an Iranian and IRGC-supported proxy movement attempted a failed coup attempt. Since that time, Tehran has pursued a patient strategy of infiltrating the Bahraini opposition. This strategy has become more operational in recent years, as Tehran has instigated and sought to exploit anti-monarchy protests in Bahrain for sectarian purposes and to undermine the Al Khalifa rulers. Iran's role in opposition protests prompted Bahrain to request the deployment of the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force to ensure the nation's integrity and territorial borders.

Citing the increasing sophistication and firepower of the weaponry that has made its way into Bahrain, Western analysts [concluded](#) that Iran is behind the proliferation of heavily armed cells and militant attacks that have plagued Bahrain in recent years. On April 22, 2013, Bahraini authorities arrested eight of its citizens for plotting with an Iranian Revolutionary Guard member to assassinate Bahraini officials and target government buildings and the international airport. Later that same year, on December 30, the Bahraini Coast Guard intercepted an Iranian shipment of more than 220 pounds of C4 explosives, 50 hand grenades, land mines, and detonators labeled "made in Syria" that were en route to Shia opposition groups in Bahrain.

In September 2015, Bahrain [uncovered an illicit Iranian weapons factory](#) aimed at supplying militant elements within the opposition with heavy weaponry to fuel unrest in the kingdom. In June 2016, two men alleged to have "[received training in weapons and explosives from Iran's Revolutionary Guards](#)" planted a bomb that killed a Bahraini woman.

In March 2017, Bahraini authorities [broke up an IRGC-linked terror cell](#), which they accused of plotting to assassinate government officials and attack police and U.S. military targets. More recently, in

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February 2019, the al-Ashtar Brigades—a Bahrain-based, Iranian-supported Shiite militia, which the United States designated as a foreign terrorist organization in July 2018—[threatened attacks](#) on American and British interests in Bahrain. In April 2019, Bahrain [sentenced](#) 139 people to prison, revoking the citizenships of most of the defendants, who were accused of establishing an IRGC-supported cell inside the country.

Kuwait

Kuwait, meanwhile, has uncovered Iranian covert operations designed to undermine American-Kuwaiti military cooperation and inflame sectarian tensions among Kuwait's Shia minority. In April 2011, the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister [reported](#) the discovery of an Iranian spy cell which had operated in Kuwait since the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. The cell "monitored the U.S. military presence and possessed explosives to bomb 'strategic' facilities" in addition to possessing lists of "names of officers" and "extremely sensitive information." This announcement followed the March sentencing of two Iranians and one Kuwaiti for spying on behalf of Iran and coincided with the expulsion of several Iranian diplomats from Kuwait.

At present, many GCC states are engaged throughout the Middle East to counter Iran's destabilizing activities. Iran's notorious involvement in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has expanded its regional influence while turning those states into incubators for extremist groups which threaten the GCC.

The JCPOA Effect

The GCC states fear that should Iran attain a nuclear weapons threshold capability, it would achieve a deterrent effect enabling it to dominate and destabilize the Middle East with impunity.

While Iran's destabilizing regional activities are troubling in their own right, Iran's pursuit of an illicit nuclear program from the mid-1990s onward has compounded the Iranian threat, and is inextricably linked to its bid for regional primacy. The GCC states fear that should Iran attain a nuclear weapons threshold capability, it would achieve a deterrent effect enabling it to dominate and destabilize the Middle East with impunity. Iran's proxies would enjoy the protection of an Iranian nuclear umbrella, circumscribing the ability of regional governments to respond effectively. Moreover, a nuclear weapons capable Iran would theoretically be able to make good on its occasional threats to close the strategically and economically vital Strait of Hormuz.

Concerns over Iran's nuclear program notwithstanding, the GCC states regarded the Obama administration's diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear impasse which began in 2013 with suspicion. It appeared to the GCC that the U.S. was abandoning its traditional Mideast allies in favor of an accommodation with Iran, the leading driver of regional instability. Numerous Arab officials weighed in over their fears that the U.S. was heading toward a "bad deal" with Iran that would legitimize its uranium enrichment program and fail to dismantle its nuclear infrastructure.

In the run up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Arab allies speculated that a bad Iran deal would bring about the expansion of nuclear technologies in the region, either through [building](#)

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[indigenous enrichment capabilities](#) or through seeking to [acquire nuclear weapons externally](#). GCC officials also [aired their concerns](#) that the nuclear deal would increase Iran’s regional aggression and [“wreak havoc in the Middle East.”](#)

Ultimately, their fears came true—as the deal struck between Iran and the P5+1 countries will enable Iran to legitimately operate an industrial-scale nuclear program that will leave it permanently on the threshold of a nuclear weapons capability when the last of the JCPOA’s key restrictions expire in less than 15 years. Iran has also drastically increased its malign regional activities since the deal’s Implementation Day, no longer encumbered by the international sanctions regime allied against it.

This is why the Trump administration withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018. Despite the temporary constraints on Iran’s nuclear program, the deal fueled, funded—through increased foreign investment—and facilitated Tehran’s aggressive regional posture, threatening many countries in the GCC.

President Trump’s Visit to Saudi Arabia



Trump and Saudi Defense Minister: New York Times

Against the backdrop of Iran’s escalating aggression and strained U.S. ties with the Gulf States, President Donald Trump made Saudi Arabia the first stop on his first overseas trip in late May, ahead of visits to Israel and Rome. Trump’s visit to the Kingdom served as a serious indicator of the Trump administration’s desire to reinvigorate ties with America’s Gulf allies. Notably, in his first major overseas [foreign policy address](#) in Riyadh, Trump urged the formation of a de facto coalition to contain Iran’s regional ambitions. “Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve,” said Trump.

The Trump administration’s renewed focus on reining in Iran’s destabilizing regional activities prioritizes the need for America to restore its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies to pre-Iran deal footing. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) rescued Iran’s economy from the brink of collapse, granting the Islamic Republic access to more than \$100 billion in previously frozen assets. Iran has used its sanctions relief windfall to ramp up military spending – increasing its military budget from \$10.2 to \$19 billion, a 90 percent increase – and escalate its regional adventurism.

The perception among American Gulf allies was that the Obama administration was more often than not willing to turn a blind eye to Iran’s malign conduct – generally at the expense of Arab interests – lest pushing back against Iran in the non-nuclear arena threaten the nuclear deal. This approach ultimately

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brought about an enriched and emboldened Iranian adversary. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies have been encouraged by early developments in the Trump administration, including the decision to sell F-16s to Bahrain and its cruise missile strike on Syria in response to a chemical weapons attack carried out by the Assad regime. The administration's actions and rhetoric in the early-going indicate that the U.S. shares the Gulf States' threat perception of Iran and is willing to adopt a more confrontational posture against Iranian aggression.

Recommendations

Refurbishing the U.S. alliance with the GCC States can serve as an essential pillar of a successful Mideast policy that reverses the growing chaos and instability that have afflicted the region in recent years, without the large-scale commitment of U.S. forces.

President Trump should continue to prioritize deepening relations with the GCC and restoring trust within the bloc. The GCC has a critical role to play in terms of restoring the regional order and pushing back against Iran's destabilizing aggression. His decision to take his first overseas trip to Saudi Arabia as well as his decision to withdraw from the JCPOA served to reassure Gulf allies that the U.S. will no longer take its alliance with the GCC states for granted. The following recommendations are intended to help President Trump make the most out of diplomatic engagement with the GCC going forward:

Broaden U.S.-GCC strategic cooperation

The Trump administration should demonstrate a commitment to Gulf security through arms sales and security partnerships. The GCC states tend to act more on their own than under a unified command structure, and President Trump should offer U.S. assistance to facilitate increased coordination and interoperability among GCC forces. By working collaboratively with individual GCC states and the bloc as a whole to build capacity and expertise, the U.S. can incentivize the GCC states, including occasional mavericks such as Qatar and Oman, to close ranks and uphold an achievable vision of regional security and stability.

The Trump administration should explore pathways to formal security arrangements with the GCC. One available option is extending the designation of "major non-NATO ally" to all six GCC states (Bahrain and Kuwait have already attained this status), something that the Obama administration [considered](#) in 2015. Such a designation – which does not include a mutual defense agreement – would provide the GCC states a variety of financial and military [benefits](#), including expedited defense procurement, joint defense research and development endeavors, and counterterrorism cooperation. Designating the bloc as a major non-NATO ally would serve to increase the collective benefits of partnership with the U.S., cementing their pro-Western orientation.

The U.S. can also explore the possibility of establishing a mutual defense pact with the GCC. Such an arrangement would potentially face domestic political obstacles, as it would obligate the U.S. to rise to the defense of parties to the treaty in the event of an attack. But it would also send a clear message to Tehran that the U.S. considers Gulf security to be sacrosanct, and would force Iran to alter its calculus when it comes to meddling in its neighbors' internal affairs and seeking to destabilize the region.

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Signaling to Iran that it will face a steep cost for provoking a confrontation with our Gulf allies would likely have a strong deterrent effect.

The GCC's alliance with the U.S. has historically centered on energy and security. The Trump administration, in concert with Congress, should seek out new and emerging fields for cooperation to set the relationship on a broader, more sustainable footing. The U.S. should explore the creation of a U.S.-GCC strategic partnership modeled on the U.S. relationship with Israel, which has expanded cooperation in a variety of fields including trade, agriculture, cybersecurity, and water. While the GCC states weathered the Arab Spring wholly intact, its member states are still subject to the economic and demographic trends which catalyzed upheaval throughout the region in 2011. The U.S. should work in tandem with the GCC on implementing structural reforms, economic modernization and diversification, and gradual social reforms as the greatest long-term guarantors of GCC government stability.

Bolster GCC ties with other U.S. regional allies

The Trump administration should continue to cultivate improved ties and security coordination between the GCC and other key U.S. allies in the Middle East. President Trump has encouraged [reconciliation](#) between the GCC and Egypt, [urged](#) Saudi Arabia to expand ties with Iraq, and has [promoted](#) Saudi ties with Pakistan, as evidenced by the selection of former Pakistani army chief of staff Gen. Raheel Sharif as head of Saudi Arabia's newly formed Islamic Military Alliance. President Trump should also continue to cultivate closer ties between the GCC and Israel, which both face the twin threats of Iranian and Sunni jihadist extremism, and also push for more unity within the GCC. Such a common purpose would advance the creation of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). Despite the recent Egyptian reluctance to join MESA, this architecture has the potential to become a force multiplier in efforts to combat Iran.

Create a mechanism for U.S.-GCC security consultation

The GCC's trepidation over the Iran nuclear deal is largely a function of the perception among its leaders that they were left out of the P5+1 and EU-led negotiating process and their concerns over Iranian meddling were not properly taken into account. President Trump should seek to formulate an ongoing consultative process between the U.S. and the EU which brings the GCC states and Israel – the nations most threatened by Iran – into the fold. The GCC countries should be treated as key stakeholders in a U.S.-led effort to secure a new, more comprehensive agreement with Iran in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. Increasing the buy-in of our Gulf allies will eliminate the trust barrier that arose during the Obama administration and ensure a unified approach to confronting the Iranian menace.

Hold Iran accountable

The U.S. can further demonstrate its commitment to the GCC states by working to amend U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231. Iran has advanced its illicit ballistic missile program and increased the flow of weaponry into the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts with impunity since the nuclear deal took effect, both of which pose direct threats to the GCC. With the international arms embargo on Iran and the restrictions on its ballistic missile program set to expire by October 18, 2020 and October 18, 2023, respectively,

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time is of the essence to develop consensus within the U.N. Security Council to permanently proscribe Iran's arms exports and ballistic missile program.

If the Trump administration's outreach efforts to the GCC bear fruit, the U.S. will reap a more unified and professional GCC security apparatus firmly anchored in the West's orbit. By reinvigorating the GCC's coordination with other key Mideast partners, the U.S. will benefit from a coalition of allies dedicated to stability, countering extremism, projecting U.S. values, and frustrating Iran's bid for regional domination. In short, refurbishing the U.S. alliance with the GCC States can serve as an essential pillar of a successful Mideast policy that reverses the growing chaos and instability that have afflicted the region in recent years, without the large-scale commitment of U.S. forces.