

GULF IN THE GULF

Can the U.S. Help End the Intra-GCC Rift?

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For years the United States has relied on the Gulf Cooperation Council as a force multiplier and an oasis of stability in a volatile part of the world, but internal disagreements are now threatening the GCC's unity.

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—the only oasis of political and economic stability in the Middle East—celebrated its 33rd anniversary in May. Alas, it also appears to be suffering from a 33-year itch. The work of decades of mutually coordinated activities in the name of stability, energy security, and threat balancing is in danger of being unraveled by the recent emergence of an inter-GCC rift. The United States has maintained a close working relationship with the Gulf body for years, relying on it for defense, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation. This has especially been the case in the post-Arab Uprising period, when America's other regional allies have been, shall we say, in flux. A rift among the GCC countries isn't just bad for the Gulf, and the United States is now making it its business to help end the dispute.

The small but disproportionately influential state of Qatar has found itself at the center of many of these intra-GCC disputes. Key destabilizing factors responsible for breaking up this so-called band of brothers include: Doha's support for Islamists throughout the region (namely the Muslim Brotherhood in

Egypt) that the other Gulf States are attempting to suppress, and for opposition factions in Syria that rival those Saudi Arabia supports; its inflammatory use of its satellite television network, Al-Jazeera, as a means of defaming other Gulf States and of speaking for Islamist elements; and its flouting of mutually agreed upon GCC security agreements (for example, 2013 Riyadh Agreement, which forbids the GCC states from interfering in the internal politics of their fellow GCC members).

Other Gulf countries have been fanning the flames through a combination of bluster and attempted bullying, as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates' announcement in March that they were withdrawing their Ambassadors from Qatar. Moreover, Oman's rejection of the Saudi-proposed Gulf Union is further evidence that a 34th year for the GCC is not a given.

But why does it matter to us? It matters because the United States is not only inconvenienced by an inter-GCC rift; it also has much to lose in terms of blood, treasure, and influence from Qatari support of radical elements in the region. Moreover, its close alliance with the small Gulf state makes Doha's behavior even more exasperating. The United States and Qatar have a long-standing strategic alliance dating back to the early 1990s. Following joint military operations conducted during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Washington and Doha signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement, which launched more than two decades of bilateral collaboration. This laid the groundwork for the United States to move its principal air base in the region from Saudi Arabia to Qatar in 2003 and to engage in high-level counterterrorism and security cooperation since that time.

Yet, over the past eight or so years, Doha has pursued a bipolar strategy, cooperating on regional counterterrorism and security initiatives, while at the same time funding radical elements in the region bent on the reverse. These competing strategies have served Qatar's ambitions to become a regional leader, an arbiter of regional disputes, and a state that maintains favorable relations with all key players. However, the Saudis and the Americans have made the point to their wayward ally that Qatar's behavior in one arena undermines their collective efforts in the other. In the Gulf, it seems to have progressed beyond this, to the point that the perception is closer to: "If you are not with us, you are against us."

As such, Washington has recently been exerting significant diplomatic effort, both privately and publicly, to urge the Gulf States to end their rift and forge a united front against threats posed by radical elements, including Iran and its proxies. During his May meeting in the region with GCC Defense Ministers, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel stressed this point, saying "The most pressing security challenges threaten this region as a whole—and they demand a collective response." American defense officials seem to be on the same page with the Emiratis and the Saudis, but bilateral ties with individual states are not enough. From the American perspective, a strong GCC bloc can act as a force multiplier in terms of America's alliances and its ability to project power. This is something the U.S. has lost over the past few years.

Washington knows that a strong GCC, allied and working in conjunction with U.S. policy priorities in the region, is capable of a great deal: from further eroding gains made by Islamists in the post-Arab Uprising period to promoting stability and security in an area of the world that desperately needs it. Likewise, a united GCC could reestablish and then tip the

balance back in favor of the so-called moderate camp that existed until early 2010, when the Arab Uprisings destabilized the regional alliance system. Finally, Saudi attempts to balance Iran are far more likely to be successful if Saudi Arabia is acting from a position of power, backed by a unified GCC bloc that in turn is backed by the United States. The question remains, will we succeed?

Much of this depends on the Islamist question and whether in fact the Islamist tide is waning, as some such as University of Denver Professor Jonathan Adelman has argued. This trend is evident in enduring Sunni-Shi'a divisions; the rivalry between competing Islamist political groups; the hostility of military force-dominated countries toward Islamists of any stripe; the increasingly bold attempts by minorities, secularists, and youth to shrug off the yoke Islamists seek to impose on them; and the failures of Islamists to run a modern state in a globalized economy and produce desperately needed jobs. What's more, Gulf States themselves have attempted to tip the scales against Islamists by injecting serious cash into the hands of their rivals in countries like Egypt.

Whether the sum total of these setbacks in various countries is enough to sour Qatar on support of such movements is unclear. Americans, especially in the defense establishment, are counting on Qatar to continue to behave pragmatically (since it does not support these groups out of ideological zeal). If, for example, the Islamists in the region are indeed declining, Qatar may decide to stop backing a losing horse. This is especially true if the repercussions of supporting Islamists outweigh any perceived benefits Doha may have previously enjoyed. Therefore, Washington must try to influence Qatar's calculus along these lines.

American attempts to promote reconciliation serve America's own agenda as well as that of the majority of its Gulf allies. The fallout over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, among other transgressions involving support for the "wrong side," is not insurmountable. The region remains fluid. The Middle East of today and its current geopolitical configuration look quite different than they did in the summer of 2012 after Mohamed Morsi won the presidential elections in Egypt, when Islamists were seemingly ascendant across the region and many of the core regional alliances were in question.

There are real opportunities to solidify a strategic alliance among erstwhile wavering partners in the name of security and stability. Therefore, it is up to the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Americans, and other regional partners to work together and to give Qatar incentives to return to the fold. For its part, the U.S. could continue to promote a united GCC: by initiating further high-level, face-to-face meetings of officials in the Gulf along the lines of the Hagel meeting; by making diplomatic gestures meant to assuage Gulf countries' fears of being abandoned by the United States (as the U.S. is thought to have done to Hosni Mubarak); and by focusing less of public calls for liberalizing reforms and more on private encouragement of political and security-sector reforms based on the notion of their being critical to long-term regional stability (both through diplomatic channels and through tangible support for nascent projects along these lines). Finally, the United States should identify points of synergy where it can bolster existing Emirati and Saudi efforts to get the GCC countries back on the same page, for it is unwise to continue pursuing similar goals in a parallel rather than collaborative manner—in the Gulf and beyond.

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