



Executive Summary

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UNITED STATES-GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL SECURITY COOPERATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Profound changes in regional geopolitical dynamics in the Arabian Gulf since the early-2000s render the region a highly challenging environment for U.S. foreign policy and military engagement. Still the world's single most important oil producing region, the Gulf States remain an area of essential economic and political interest for the United States. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations form the most important, and so far most stable block of countries within the region that have consistently been tied to a partnership with the United States, despite disagreements and fluctuating relations between the United States and individual GCC nations. At a time of continuing domestic instability in Iraq and an increasingly isolated Iran, the geopolitical weight of the GCC states has dramatically risen over the past 10 years; the GCC states' enormous economic power, coupled to some of the most stable political states in the entire Middle East and North Africa region, call for continuously close U.S.-GCC relations in the security sphere—as well as in terms of financial investment and trade—as an important element in U.S. foreign policy.

With populations of just a few million each, the GCC's small monarchies—Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait—have found themselves among the world's wealthiest countries on a per capita basis. With the influence of two powerful neighbors (Iran and Iraq) attenuated on the Gulf's political and economic scene, this leaves the Gulf monarchies as the region's most significant economic power center by far, not only in the Gulf but also in the economically weakened remaining wider Middle East. Their enormous oil revenues have also put the GCC

monarchies into the fortuitous position of remaining the Gulf's only politically stable U.S. allies (political turmoil in Bahrain in 2012 taken aside), with growing political and economic influence beyond their own borders. The region's economic power has started to shift decisively from its former heavyweights, Iran and Iraq, toward the rising Gulf monarchies.

The GCC states' strengthened economic position in several cases has also been tied to rising geopolitical ambitions by its smaller members, contrary to the past when such ambitions had been largely limited to Saudi Arabia. Qatar and the UAE have emerged as diplomatic centers in their own right, entertaining interests in foreign politics and mediating roles.

These fundamental shifts in the political environment coincide with changes in the regional perception of the United States as a military partner. The outcome of the conflict in Iraq, resulting in yet another unstable state at the heart of the Middle East and in immediate proximity to the GCC, has left many former supporters of U.S. engagement in the region disappointed and cynical. Furthermore, the ongoing U.S. defense budget adjustments have raised concerns among the GCC leaders about the future of U.S. military capabilities, and U.S. willingness and ability to engage in the region. Although in a strategic military document in 2011, the U.S. Government reaffirmed its commitment to assuring the security and stability of the Middle East, the GCC countries remain worried about the future.

This raises questions as to the future shape of U.S. security cooperation in the region, which from the beginning has been a cornerstone of U.S.-Gulf relations. The space for U.S. engagement nevertheless

remains large, particularly in view of the long-established historical ties between U.S. and GCC militaries, and the continued stationing of U.S. forces and ships on the coasts of several GCC partners. It would seem unlikely that any of the GCC states would wish to invite the military presence of various different foreign partners, thus rendering a stable U.S. presence in the Gulf a likely continuing pillar of GCC-U.S. relations. A U.S. strategy that continues to ensure the durability of this presence appears advisable in this context as long as GCC partners wish for such; while the financially strong position of many GCC states would arguably allow for new arrangements over the financial burden-sharing of such presence that would alleviate pressure on the U.S. side in view of current budgetary pressures.

The GCC states displayed a remarkable resilience to the otherwise region-wide Arab Spring. But at the same time, the perceived U.S. abandonment of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt sent important signals to the GCC about the potential durability of U.S. political and military support in the event of popular demand for more democratic rights and access to their country's economic resources. This intrinsic U.S. dilemma in the region has since further risen in the aftermath of the events in Bahrain in early-2011, when, for the first time, significant protest waves began to hit a Gulf monarchy, and one most vulnerable to protest owing to pre-existing sectarian cleavages between the Sunni royal family and the majority Shiite Bahraini population.

The Bahrain uprisings illustrated a particular policy dilemma in the Gulf: whether or not U.S. security cooperation should entail the unconditional support of political regimes in the GCC irrespective of their domestic actions. Human rights and the support of democratic movements form an essential part of American self-understanding, and, while the GCC monarchies have never been considered formal democracies (as was Iran's Shah regime or Egypt's Mubarak regime for instance), the events in Bahrain in 2012 re-raised the question of how far U.S. support in such a case would go.

For the United States, this means most likely that future ways of engaging with the GCC to ensure domestic stability will need to entail much more than military and technical means. They will include increasing cooperation in areas such as good governance, which is essential to strike the balance between domestic minorities so as to avert any outbreak of sectarian violence, as well as domestic political reform toward greater popular participation and government accountability; political

transparency and fair media relations; and domestic economic reform, including the further diversification of the GCC economies toward more inclusive and sustained economic growth that offers employment opportunities for all GCC citizens. All of these goals form an intrinsic part of the interests of all GCC states, and the United States, as a political and economic partner, has an essential role to play.

A sensible U.S. Army policy response would also entail a greater role for providing training in "soft" military strategies, such as the use of intelligence and strategic communication by domestic governments to respond to, but also listen to domestic sources of discontent. Such strategic tools highlight the continued importance of U.S. and European security partners in the region owing to their considerable experience with such nontraditional security tools.

The Gulf region's changing overall security system, tied to the continuing instability of Iraq, the threat of an evolving nuclear Iran, and the economic rise of the GCC has meant that the U.S. role as a political and military partner has been changing and is likely to continue to evolve.

This monograph was completed in September 2013, and therefore does not include mention of more recent developments such as the rise of the Islamic State or the November 2013 nuclear agreement with Iran. But the problems and themes it describes are permanent ones, and continue to present important considerations for protecting the interests of the United States and its allies in the region in the longer term.

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