

Rethinking U.S. Policy Toward the Fractured GCC

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May 12, 2020

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Brief Analysis

Genuinely resolving the various entrenched disputes between GCC states is unlikely, so Washington should focus instead on managing relations with them bilaterally while still maximizing regional security.

On April 22, President Trump held a phone call with Qatari emir Tamim bin Hamad, spurring speculation about a potential breakthrough in the country's long-running diplomatic rift with fellow Gulf Cooperation Council members. Despite such indicators of rapprochement, however, the parties are highly unlikely to restore relations to what they were pre-June 2017, when Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other states severed relations with Doha and presented it with a long list of economic, political, and military demands. The intervening years have only increased the number and severity of disputes between GCC members, including avowedly neutral parties Kuwait and Oman. As such, it is unwise to continue hoping that international pressure or common threats and interests will be enough to resolve the situation or unify the GCC anytime soon—in fact, the spat seems more likely to worsen. If foreign governments do not reshape their policies to fit this reality, their efforts may prove fruitless or even counterproductive.

GCC DIVISIONS ARE HERE TO STAY

One reason why the current rift seems irreparable in the near term is that the public has become involved in unprecedented ways. Unlike in previous GCC disputes, which remained at the leadership level, citizens of each country are actively encouraged to hurl insults at their adversaries today, even against the ruling class—a redline that was never before crossed. GCC leaders are constitutionally protected from criticism in their own country, but they are now being widely portrayed in derogatory terms by commentators in neighboring states. For example, one Emirati Twitter user has become infamous for regularly posting offensive remarks about Emir Tamim and his mother Moza, to the point where even some prominent Saudi and Emirati commentators have advised against this approach.

Indeed, social media has become the rift's main battleground, with accounts spreading fake news while bots use provocative hashtags to create trending topics. On May 4, for example, Saudi-linked accounts posted photos and videos claiming that alleged gunfire in Qatar was part of a coup. The next day, Qatari-linked accounts speculated that the Saudi king had died. The fact that such campaigns are often orchestrated at the highest levels of government underlines the difficulty of resolving the situation.

In parallel to these bitter exchanges, occasional bouts of promising diplomatic activity have emerged between the parties. Yet this official outreach is perfunctory and should not be interpreted as a sign of warming relations. For example, a few weeks before the December 2019 GCC summit in Riyadh, Qatari foreign minister Muhammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani reportedly made [a secret visit to Saudi Arabia](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qatar-rift-overshadows-riyadh-summit) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qatar-rift-overshadows-riyadh-summit>), and discussions between the two governments continued for a month. By the time of the summit, however, it was clear a deal had not been reached when Emir Tamim refused to attend and sent his prime minister instead.

More recently, GCC states have held a series of lower-level virtual discussions regarding the coronavirus pandemic: their health ministers met on March 14, their labor ministers met on April 15, and their finance ministers met on April 21. At first glance, this seems like significant progress considering that Qatar's health minister was denied a visa to attend a Saudi meeting on the pandemic in late February. Yet much like the pre-summit talks, these lower-level meetings hold little promise of wider rapprochement.

DISPUTES ARE NOT LIMITED TO QATAR

The main rift between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini coalition tends to get the headlines, but the GCC is riddled with other deep fissures. In Oman, leaders are displeased with the [persistent Saudi military presence in al-Mahra](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/challenges-await-omans-new-sultan-as-mourning-period-ends) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/challenges-await-omans-new-sultan-as-mourning-period-ends>), the Yemeni province that lies directly on the sultanate's border. Moreover, in April 2019, an Omani court sentenced five Emiratis to prison on charges of espionage.

In Kuwait, the government is trying its best to maintain neutrality in the dispute, but Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have repeatedly pushed it to take positions in their favor. The situation is particularly difficult for Kuwait because the country tends to allow wider space for freedom of expression than other GCC states; thus, when private citizens voice views that displease either side, authorities face foreign pressure to silence them.

Other GCC fissures are either nascent or tied to seemingly inevitable regional dynamics. For example, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE still appear to be allies, notable differences emerged between them over [how to handle growing problems in south Yemen](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-leverage-not-enough-to-achieve-peace-in-yemen) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-leverage-not-enough-to-achieve-peace-in-yemen>). More broadly, GCC conflicts are diverging and multiplying beyond issues of political Islam (which intensified with the 2011 Arab uprisings) and the wounds inflicted by past crises (e.g., alleged Saudi and Emirati involvement in the attempted 1996 counter-coup in Qatar). The rise of a new generation of Gulf leaders has empowered young princes who wish to express their independence from one another, and they will do so under different conditions from those that prevailed when the council was formed in 1981—including new intra-GCC existential threats that cannot be overlooked.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Even if the recent Gulf ministerial discussions and U.S. outreach result in a top-level virtual meeting or wider diplomatic resolution of the GCC rift, any such agreement would be superficial—the roots of the conflict would remain untouched, increasing the prospect of renewed disputes down the road. After all, Saudi Arabia and Qatar signed seemingly durable agreements following diplomatic showdowns in 2013 and 2014, but both fell apart, and the disputes they sought to address only worsened. Perhaps most important, the growing personal enmity between

key GCC leaders is unlikely to disappear.

In that sense, one scenario could conceivably allow for fuller resolution of the dispute: unexpected leadership succession, which each antagonist has sought to foment in rival countries over the years. Yet this is highly improbable at present because young leaders have established a tight grip on power in the three most important capitals: Emir Tamim in Doha, [Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Riyadh](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-fifty-year-reign-mbs-and-the-future-of-saudi-arabia) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-fifty-year-reign-mbs-and-the-future-of-saudi-arabia>), and [Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mbz-and-the-future-leadership-of-the-uae) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mbz-and-the-future-leadership-of-the-uae>). To be sure, the Saudis and Emiratis believe that two older figures are still in control of Qatar's state affairs and are to blame for many of the ongoing problems: Tamim's father, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, and former prime minister Hamad bin Jassim. From Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's perspective, then, the passing of either man could change the dispute's dynamics—though the likelihood of substantial change would be very low.

In light of these realizations, U.S. policy in the Gulf will have a much better chance of bearing fruit if it jettisons the effort to repair the broken GCC and focuses more on bilateral relations with individual member states. Regardless of how regional events develop or how poorly the GCC functions as an institution, all six members are keen to maintain strong relations with the United States. This approach means crafting or editing policies in a way that takes a divided GCC as a given—including efforts to jumpstart the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), a Saudi-proposed, U.S.-backed framework that would require GCC-wide cooperation in order to work as originally envisioned in 2017. Such alterations will make the overall effort to counter Iran more difficult, but even low-level GCC cooperation on that front could prove useful with judicious, realistic U.S. engagement.

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