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Gulf Arab Summit Could Be Overshadowed by Israel-UAE Meeting

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Brief Analysis

Normalization with Israel will be the elephant in the room at the Riyadh summit, though Iran diplomacy and persistent internal rifts bear close watching as well.

On December 14, officials from the Gulf Cooperation Council states will meet in Saudi Arabia for their latest summit. Two days beforehand, Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett arrived in Abu Dhabi for a meeting with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed (aka MbZ), the de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates.

In global and historical terms, a first-time Israeli public summit overshadows the forty-second GCC Summit. When the council was established in 1981 with U.S. and British encouragement, the meetings served as an important tool for keeping the Gulf Arab states out of the Iran-Iraq War. These days, however, their main purpose seems to be celebrating the GCC's continued existence. The previous meeting, held last January, marked the formal end of a nearly four-year rift in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain had established a blockade against Qatar. (The two

other GCC members, Kuwait and Oman, did not participate in the squabble, which supposedly began over Qatar's interference in the other countries' domestic affairs, alleged support for terrorism, and close ties to Iran.)

The question now is whether that appearance of unity will change in the aftermath of Bennett's visit. Although the UAE and Bahrain are signatories to the Abraham Accords, last year's landmark Arab normalization agreements with Israel, the **other GCC members are not**. Their reasons vary. Saudi Arabia allows Israeli aircraft to overfly its territory but has held back from formal diplomatic engagement, apparently because of King Salman's concern for the Palestinians and the status of Jerusalem. Oman welcomed a visit by Binyamin Netanyahu when he was prime minister but does not have official diplomatic relations. Qatar held ties with Israel in the past—ironically, it was the first Gulf state to establish them—but it generally keeps its distance today aside from relaxing certain restrictions on Israeli visitors. Kuwait is the most reluctant to normalize because of adverse public opinion. All of these states are probably also watching to see whether the UAE and Bahrain's risk pays off—including in the form of possible U.S. benefits.

In this context, the current summit merits closer attention than usual. Besides the potential for further signals about how member states view Bennett's UAE visit and normalization in general, specific aspects of the event could help clarify where the Gulf states stand with each other and Washington.

Why in Saudi Arabia Again?

Although the venue has historically rotated between member states, this summit is the fourth in a row to be hosted by the kingdom. Why is unclear, but it could be a source of friction. Saudi Arabia regards itself as the de facto leader of the GCC, whose secretariat is in Riyadh. Yet the other members prefer to see the council as a forum of equals. The timing of the Israel-UAE meeting could further illuminate this tension.

Who Will Be There?

Recent summits have been notable for the absence of several heads of state, and this will likely continue. Eighty-five-year-old King Salman formally sent out the invitations, but he apparently remains cloistered for health reasons in NEOM, the futuristic city being built on the kingdom's northern Red Sea coast.

Also missing will be President Khalifa bin Zayed of the UAE, who suffered a severe stroke several years ago and is seldom seen in public. MbZ will probably skip the event as well. Despite his powerful role, he has no formal political position in the UAE—which absolves him from having to explain either his absence from summits or his meeting with Bennett. In any case, Vice President Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, will be present.

Also unlikely to attend is Emir Nawaf of Kuwait. He ascended to the throne just last year, but the eighty-four-year-old is in poor health and handed over some of his powers to his younger brother, Crown Prince Mishal, three weeks ago. Another absentee will be Sultan Haitham of Oman, who is visiting London on a private trip instead.

The star of the show will undoubtedly be the Saudi king's favored son Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS), who chaired the previous summit as well. Notably, he has just completed a whirlwind tour to the other member states.

What's on the Agenda?

The final communique of the previous summit addressed regional issues in a telling order: Iran came first, followed by Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Sudan, Morocco, Afghanistan, and the status of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Analysts will also be looking for any change in the boilerplate wording on "The Palestinian Cause," which the communique noted was "considered to be the first priority by Arabs and Muslims." The document made no mention of normalization with Israel, and despite Bennett's UAE visit, the issue is unlikely to be addressed in the next communique either.

In official terms, Iran will likely be the main focus again, particularly given that Saudi Arabia and the UAE opened direct talks with Tehran this year. In the previous communique, the GCC expressed concern about terrorism and Iran's "destabilizing behavior," including its missiles and nuclear program. In light of the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna, the council may once again state that it favors "building trust...and involving GCC countries...in any negotiation process" on Iran.

In addition, the Emirati delegation will likely raise its annual objection to "Iranian occupation of the three islands of the UAE," referring to Tehran's 1971 seizure of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, which sit astride shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf. The islands were taken just as Britain gave up its role as the decisive power in the region and withdrew its forces, paving the way for pre-revolutionary Iran to exert itself as the most powerful state in the Middle East.

Other Issues

The dominant context behind this summit is the widespread perception that the Biden administration is reluctant to play a decisive military role in the Gulf, despite the area's continuing significance in providing **much of the world's oil** and natural gas. This perception may have influenced the reported spate of recent diplomatic contacts between the Gulf states and Iran. Even Saudi Arabia has conducted discreet talks, though the most significant public contact may have been last week's trip to Tehran by Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, the UAE's national security advisor and full brother of MbZ. No details have been provided about his meeting with Ali Shamkhani, the long-serving secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council; one wonders if Bennett was given a readout of the encounter when he visited Abu Dhabi.

An esoteric summit detail to keep an eye on is Bahrain's behavior toward Qatar. The island's leaders have appeared reluctant to support the Saudi-led decision to end the Gulf rift. Instead, its media wars with Qatar have continued, as has squabbling over fishing rights. Perhaps Doha will provide a sweetener by granting Bahrain a role in housing soccer fans during next year's World Cup, especially since Qatar may lack sufficient hotel space.

Prior to Bennett's UAE trips, GCC news was dominated by coverage of the visits MbS was conducting to other GCC states, suggesting that the summit could mark a de facto acquiescence to him becoming the accepted ruler of Saudi Arabia. That would indeed be a significant shift, especially since he has held back from grabbing a global role in recent weeks ago by skipping the G20 summit in Rome and the climate meeting in Glasgow (though his absence did not stem from any fear of the international limelight, but apparently from a desire to avoid being snubbed by President Biden over the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi).

Conclusion

For observers wanting to know the implications of the Bennett-MbZ meeting, the GCC Summit will provide an early reading. For the United States, the overarching issue to monitor is what council members have to say about tensions over Iran's nuclear program, though the parameters of that discussion may well be changing as Tehran continues to make notable advances.

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