

Will the Gulf Crisis Blow Up the Middle East?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

A discussion of what's at stake in the region, how to evaluate the situation, and the roles of Israel and Iran.

The following Q&A with Washington Institute fellow Simon Henderson was originally published as part of *an article in (<http://www.momentmag.com/will-gulf-crisis-blow-middle-east/>) Moment (<http://www.momentmag.com/will-gulf-crisis-blow-middle-east/>) by Amy E. Schwartz (<http://www.momentmag.com/will-gulf-crisis-blow-middle-east/>)*.

Amy E. Schwartz: Is the Trump administration signaling a significant change of direction in American policy in the Gulf? If so, what would be the most immediate effects?

Simon Henderson: The traditional allies of the U.S. in the Gulf have been the six conservative Arab states of, in geographical order from west to east, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Together in 1981 they formed the Gulf Cooperation Council, essentially as a way of protecting themselves from being dragged into the Iran-Iraq war, which had started the year before. There have always been tensions within the GCC, but they have managed to maintain a surprising unity -- until this year.

Despite the president's tweets, American policy appears to be to try to repair the schism which has opened up between, on one side, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, and Qatar on the other side. Kuwait is attempting a mediating role, while Oman is standing on the sidelines.

If the efforts of Washington and others do not succeed, the GCC will probably collapse. Iran will be a major beneficiary if this happens. GCC unity, or at least the facade of it, has been an important barrier to Iran's regional adventurism.

Schwartz: Until this happened, many Americans -- maybe even the president! -- had no idea we had a major military base in Qatar. Does the crisis endanger it?

Henderson: The U.S. base at al-Udaid, south of Doha, is huge. Look at it on Google Earth. Apart from a very long runway and enormous parking areas of aircraft, it is also a Combined Air Operations Center, or CAOC, pronounced

Kay-ok. The base has been used extensively during the combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is now an important part of the action against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Since it is hard to predict what is going to happen in the Qatar crisis, it is hard to say how this will affect operations against ISIS. Al-Udaid is replaceable, but replacing it would take time. The CAOC is particularly important. Before U.S. forces started to operate out of al-Udaid in 2004, they used a base in Saudi Arabia -- until Riyadh asked them to leave. The UAE already hosts U.S. aircraft but does not have a CAOC.

Schwartz: Is the current crisis likely to abate now that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is engaging in shuttle diplomacy?

Henderson: I think Secretary Tillerson's definition of success will be to stop the crisis from worsening. Both sides have entrenched positions which they don't look like they'll be giving up soon.

Schwartz: Is the Trump administration aligned with the Israeli government's policies toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf? Is there "daylight" between them? How do the Israelis feel about our weapons sales to Saudi Arabia?

Henderson: As with other policies, it is hard to work out sometimes what the Trump administration wants to do in the Middle East. Israel has developed quiet diplomatic and trading ties with Gulf countries, which have been facilitated by previous American administrations. The Trump administration appears supportive but has also been pressing for progress in Israeli-Palestinian talks. What has changed in recent years has been a new Gulf Arab perception that Iran is their major threat and Israel is a natural ally in combating it. Another more subtle change is that the Gulf Arab governments no longer regard peace between Israel and the Palestinians as a necessary precondition for developing relations with Israel, even though they still pay public lip service to this formula. Meanwhile, Israel is anxious to maintain its qualitative military edge, so it is apprehensive about any American arms sales to the Gulf Arabs.

Schwartz: Some have suggested that the Trump administration is "taking sides" in the centuries-old Sunni-Shia rivalry by urging the Gulf states to get tougher on Iran. Is that really happening, and is it dangerous?

Henderson: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, all Sunni-ruled, see themselves as allies of the U.S. and want the American role and presence in the area to continue. Shia Iran doesn't like this status quo and wants to change it. In particular, Tehran wants to push the U.S. Navy out of the Gulf. It is clear to me that we should side with our allies, but labeling it as taking sides religiously is incorrect.

Schwartz: Are Trump and Tillerson in accord on this, or is there a tug of war on policy toward the Gulf?

Henderson: There have been apparent differences between the White House and the State and Defense Departments. This is not surprising, though public revelations about it are not helpful.

Schwartz: Is it possible to be "too tough" on Iran?

Henderson: Iran is a malevolent force in the Middle East. My own view is that this will continue until the regime in Tehran changes. We should have a policy that encourages this. It arguably requires being both tough as well as firm, and also encouraging those who could emerge as a new leadership. ❖

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