

# Resetting U.S.-Gulf Ties: Beyond Summits and Arms Sales

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Jun 9, 2017

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Brief Analysis

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**A sustainable reset will require greater consultation prior to policy initiatives, a greater willingness among GCC states to work together, and a U.S. willingness to reassume a leadership role by fashioning security policy frameworks for its partners.**

**P**resident Trump's attendance at the recent summits in Riyadh was a first step toward resetting relations with America's Gulf Arab allies. But advancing long-term U.S. interests in the Gulf and beyond will require more than arms deals and speeches. It will take a degree of competence and geopolitical savvy that has been lacking in U.S. regional policy for a number of years now, as well as continued military engagement and a willingness to lead by creating policy frameworks that discourage allies from taking destabilizing actions on their own.

## ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

**R**ecent U.S.-Gulf tensions can be traced to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the outcome of which led many regional leaders to believe that the United States had, through incompetence or design, turned Sunni Arab-ruled Baghdad over to the Shiites and Iran. This was reinforced by a perception that the Obama administration too eagerly courted traditional enemies such as Iran, and too quickly abandoned traditional allies such as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak during the initial phases of the 2011 "Arab Spring."

Because of this distrust, various steps that the administration hoped would reassure the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in fact exacerbated their concerns. For example, the more than \$115 billion in arms proffered by the Obama administration were seen by some as proof that America was building up its allies in order to disengage from the region. And the 35,000 U.S. troops deployed in and around the Gulf gave little comfort to partners at a time when the Syrian regime and its allies were free to slaughter and displace civilians, use chemical weapons (CW) with impunity, rout rebel forces, and retake lost territory.

## **PUSHBACK IN SYRIA**

**S**ince taking office, the Trump administration has made several moves that should allay some of these Gulf concerns. On April 7, the United States launched a cruise missile strike on al-Shayrat Air Base following the Assad regime's CW attack against civilians in Khan Sheikhoun. And on May 18, June 6, and June 8, it targeted foreign pro-regime forces that threatened Syrian rebels and their coalition advisors near the border town of al-Tanf. While these measures are a good first step toward repairing U.S. credibility in the Gulf, the real test lies in whether the administration sustains and broadens its tough approach. Part of this task involves tending to its chemical redline, lest Damascus cross it again by resuming CW attacks. Yet that alone will not solve the geopolitical disaster that is Syria. After all, the war's true "weapons of mass destruction" have been assault rifles, artillery, and barrel bombs -- whereas CW have killed around 1,500 people in Syria, conventional weapons have killed nearly half a million.

Moreover, while the United States is certainly justified in striking pro-regime forces that move against rebel and coalition forces in de-escalation zones, it would be far better to build rebel forces capable of defending themselves against such threats. A revitalized train-and-equip effort for non-Salafist rebels in southern Syria (and wherever else possible) could help ensure the viability of any de-escalation agreements or safe zones, prevent additional mass refugee flows, and impose significant costs on the regime and its allies. The goal of such a strategy would be to bleed pro-regime forces and keep them tied down, thereby precluding new offensives against rebels in the east, the south, or Idlib province. This approach is the only effective means of creating the kind of "hurting stalemate" that might pare back the regime's ambitions, force it to observe local ceasefires and de-escalation zones, and block Iranian efforts to build a land bridge to the Mediterranean Sea.

## **SELLING ARMS VS. BUILDING CAPABILITIES**

**W**ashington also announced \$110 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia during President Trump's May 20-21 visit. This package apparently includes around \$12.5 billion in sales already cleared by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency and passed along to Congress for approval, as well as another \$84.8 billion in sales that have been in the works for years and are finally being offered to Riyadh on a preliminary basis pending a nod from the State Department and Congress. Yet it is far from clear that Riyadh will exercise its option to buy all these weapons, or that U.S. lawmakers will allow every sale to go through.

More important, while some purchases may fill gaps in the Saudi force structure, arms sales alone are unlikely to address the kingdom's major capability gaps. These include securing its long border with Yemen; dealing with the threat posed by Houthi mortars, rockets, and short-range missiles; conducting internal security operations in Eastern Province in a manner that does not exacerbate tensions with Shiite residents there; and securing its long coastline and critical maritime infrastructure. Likewise, the GCC states lack an integrated regional missile-defense architecture, leaving them vulnerable to Iranian saturation tactics.

Given the often lackluster performance of many U.S.-trained militaries in the region -- including Saudi Arabia's -- Washington should rethink its approach to security force assistance, eschewing attempts to transform partner forces into miniature versions of the U.S. military. Instead, it should adopt a tailored approach that helps them become more effective, by building on lessons derived from past successes (e.g., training and mentoring Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service and the armed forces of the United Arab Emirates) and recognizing local cultural preferences and operational needs. Now more than ever, the United States needs competent, capable allies in the Gulf.

## **AMERICA STILL NEEDS TO LEAD**

**A**lthough the GCC states can greatly improve their individual capabilities, it is unrealistic to hope that they will create an effective collective security organization similar to NATO, especially given their inability to cooperate on an integrated regional missile-defense architecture or deal with broader threats. More often than not, their limited military cooperation has been facilitated by the United States (apart from the problematic coalition campaign in Yemen). For this and other reasons, Washington needs to remain engaged in the region, diplomatically and militarily.

More specifically, the United States needs to take the lead in fashioning security policy frameworks for its regional partners, lest they act on their own in ways that harm American interests. The Obama administration's failure to provide an effective framework for action in Syria led Gulf partners to make unhelpful moves such as supporting extremist Salafi jihadists against the Assad regime. Failure to lead also made it more difficult to shape Saudi and Emirati choices in Yemen, and may have played a role in generating the current diplomatic crisis with Qatar.

At the same time, the Obama administration's apparent attempt to disengage from the region engendered a change in the Gulf's strategic culture, making some U.S. partners more confident in their ability to act on their own. While this shift entails risks (see Syria and Yemen), it has also created opportunities, since partners may now be more willing to "walk point" on certain issues and allow Washington to "lead from behind" when other interests or crises elsewhere in the world require its attention.

As the events of the past decade-and-a-half of have shown, there is no substitute for sound policies grounded in sound geopolitical judgment. Arms sales or military surges cannot compensate for policy errors and missteps whose effects are regional in scope and geopolitical in scale, such as America's 2003 invasion of Iraq, its handling of the Syria crisis, or its attempted post-2011 military disengagement from the region. Likewise, immigration bans, failure to affirm treaty commitments, or the leaking of allied intelligence could affect U.S. relations with more than just the parties directly involved.

Finally, credibility is a two-way street. In recent years, some GCC states have taken actions in Syria, Yemen, and perhaps now Qatar that may not serve their or America's interests. A successful reset of U.S.-Gulf relations will therefore require greater consultation prior to major policy initiatives or departures; a greater willingness among GCC states to pool capabilities and work toward common goals; and a U.S. willingness to reassume a leadership role in a region that has repeatedly demonstrated the risks of both overreach and disengagement.

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