

# Gulf Support to the Counter-ISIS Campaign

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Brief Analysis

## Some Gulf states are showing interest in providing additional support to the counter-ISIS coalition, and Washington should seize these emerging opportunities.

**O**n March 22, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will host foreign ministers and other senior officials from countries that make up the U.S.-led "Global Coalition to Counter ISIS." The goal of the meeting is to set the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria "on a lasting and irreversible path to defeat," according to the State Department.

America's strategic partners in the Persian Gulf will be among the secretary's guests. These states have been key players in the coalition's multidimensional lines of effort -- among other contributions, they have provided basing and access for U.S. and local forces, implemented broader anti-ISIS campaigns such as counter-messaging and counter-financing, and helped fund humanitarian assistance. Still, questions linger about the limits of Gulf support for the coalition. Following is a six-point brief on the current realities that underlie opportunities and challenges in expanding that support.

**1. The Gulf states have a strong vested interest in seeing ISIS defeated in Syria, Iraq, and beyond.** For many Gulf countries, ISIS represents not only a threat to the region, but also a major domestic security challenge. Saudi Arabia has been home to multiple deadly ISIS bombings and shootings targeting civilians, security personnel, and foreigners since late 2014. In Kuwait, ISIS plotters were responsible for the most deadly terrorist attack in the country's history in June 2015. On the island state of Bahrain, preventing ISIS suicide attacks like those launched in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait has been a top concern. The stakes in the counter-ISIS campaign are especially high for the Gulf countries because ISIS terrorists inside their borders have been linked directly to external ISIS networks.

**2. Gulf partners continue to worry that the territorial defeat of ISIS will result in territorial gains for Iran and its allies.** Many Gulf states view Iran as their most dangerous long-term threat, even more so than ISIS. As a result, they

believe that any campaign against the group should include military and political provisions for preventing Iran and its allies from expanding their influence. As Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir indicated on February 21, the coalition's goal should be to liberate the region from ISIS without allowing Hezbollah, Tehran, or Syria's Assad regime to fill the void. Similar to the ISIS threat, the Iranian threat to the Gulf has a clear domestic element -- Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait in particular are concerned about Iranian support for militant activity inside their borders.

**3. Some Gulf states seem interested in providing additional military support to the counter-ISIS campaign.** Last month, Foreign Minister Jubeir reiterated that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states were willing to provide special forces to support U.S. forces against ISIS. He also remarked that the Saudi-led, forty-one-member "Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism" established in December 2015 -- not to be confused with the smaller Saudi coalition against Houthi rebels in Yemen -- was ready to provide ground troops. On March 16, the Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspaper *al-Hayat* reported that the antiterrorism alliance was considering the deployment of up to 40,000 troops for this purpose. Both Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates had previously expressed their willingness to support U.S. forces with their own; in fact, an unspecified number of UAE personnel are already on the ground in Syria (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>). Augmenting the coalition contingent there with forces from multiple Gulf countries would be an important (albeit delicate) political milestone in the campaign.

The renewed expressions of military support may be linked to two developments: America's own decision to ramp up the fight by deploying ground forces in Syria, and the Gulf's perception that the new administration in Washington will take a tougher approach toward Iran's destabilizing regional policies. To be sure, the Saudi-led war in Yemen continues to be a priority for Gulf leaders, especially in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The Saudis view the threat from Iranian-supported Houthis on their southern border as existential, while the UAE is especially concerned about the growth of Yemen's Islamist extremist threat. These foreign policy priorities are unlikely to change anytime soon.

**4. The Gulf states may be poised to expand support for the Iraqi government's counter-ISIS campaign and subsequent stabilization efforts.** On February 25, Jubeir made an historic visit to Iraq -- the first by a top Saudi official in twenty-seven years. The move followed the appointment of a Saudi ambassador to Baghdad in 2015, reopening an embassy that had been closed for more than two decades. This diplomatic rapprochement may be driven by Riyadh's desire to cultivate influence in Iraq ahead of an expected ISIS defeat. For its part, Kuwait already plays a valuable role in facilitating Baghdad's counter-ISIS activities. Going forward, Washington should support increased Gulf intelligence sharing with the Iraqis on issues such as foreign fighters, as well as no-strings Saudi equipment transfers to the Iraqi army and Counter-Terrorism Service (perhaps indirectly).

**5. Despite budgetary pressures, the Gulf states can be expected to continue providing major resources for the refugee crises in neighboring countries as well as for internally displaced persons in Syria and Iraq.** Recent fiscal conservation drives by various Gulf governments do not appear to be having a tangible effect on their regional security expenditures. Pressures that cut to the core of Gulf stability are driving most of the monarchies to address the refugee crisis by providing significant funding to other host countries rather than by absorbing displaced Syrians themselves. In some ways, the UAE has been a welcome exception in this regard.

**6. The Gulf states have pursued meaningful counter-ISIS activities at home, but their record varies widely when it comes to aggressively countering terrorist ideology and financing in general.** Most Gulf countries have prosecuted and sentenced individuals for financial, ideological, logistical, or other support of ISIS. Abu Dhabi stands out as a particularly valued partner for counter-ISIS messaging and other counter-ideology work due to its comparatively strong emphasis on religious tolerance at home. Riyadh has mobilized multiple government institutions against the ISIS threat and is a strong partner in counter-ISIS financing. Still, many Gulf governments

have tactical alliances and other relationships with ultraconservative groups inside (and sometimes outside) their countries that complicate broader counterterrorism campaigns. Accordingly, tactical gains against ISIS could be ephemeral -- the larger war against jihadism will certainly drag on without more aggressive Gulf efforts in this area.

In sum, defeating ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and beyond, and providing stability and security in its wake, represent basic regional objectives on which the United States and its Gulf partners clearly agree. In the face of an exceedingly complex operating environment, Washington should seize emerging opportunities to expand Gulf cooperation toward these goals. It is also a useful time to praise and reward specific partners who are aggressively countering terrorist ideology and financing or otherwise pursuing genuine initiatives to help prevent the next ISIS from emerging.

*Lori Plotkin Boghardt is the Barbara Kay Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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