

GCC Summit Will Gauge Regional Confidence in U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

The December 10-11 Gulf Cooperation Council meeting should indicate how member states will respond to U.S.-led nuclear diplomacy with Iran, among other issues.

In past years, U.S. and European officials paid little mind to the annual GCC summit attended by the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, which usually takes place during the late December holidays and is more ceremonial than substantive. Yet the 2013 meeting, hosted this week by Kuwait, is sure to attract greater attention due to its earlier start date as well as persistent Gulf concerns about the U.S.-led diplomatic breakthrough with Iran. Other issues will shape the discussions, of course, including strains in the OPEC oil cartel, apprehension about the unstable, pro-Tehran government in Iraq, and continued spillover from Syria's civil war. But Iran is the unifying factor in all of these issues by virtue of its potentially increasing oil exports and its support for the Iraqi and Syrian governments.

LONGSTANDING TENSIONS WITH IRAN

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Kuwait have long been worried that a nuclear deal with Iran would confirm the Islamic Republic's status as a near-nuclear weapons state, allow it to continue enriching uranium, and give it hegemonic leverage in the region. Since the November 24 first-step agreement in Geneva, however, voices trumpeting official concern have been muted in the Gulf as GCC leaders apparently pause to consider next steps. UAE foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan flew to Tehran shortly after the announcement, while his Iranian counterpart, Mohammed Javad Zarif, visited Kuwait, Qatar, Dubai, and Oman.

Iran was also the dominant issue at this past weekend's "Manama Dialogue" security conference in Bahrain, organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. Among the participants were U.S. defense secretary Chuck Hagel and deputy secretary of state William Burns, as well as an official from Iran's Foreign Ministry. All of the conference sessions -- ranging from "The U.S. and the Region" to "The Influence of Sectarian

Politics in Regional Security" and "Security in the Strait of Hormuz" -- had an Iran theme.

Yet the nuclear issue is only the latest manifestation of Gulf Arab caution toward Iran, which predates the 1979 Islamic Revolution. During the shah's era, Tehran had a territorial claim on Bahrain -- one occasionally revived by Iranian parliamentarians today. And apart from Oman, whose leaders practice Ibadi Islam, GCC leaders are all Sunni Muslims, which can create tension with local Shiite communities and, by extension, Shiite-ruled Iran. This is especially true in Bahrain, where the majority of citizens are Shiite. Manama has openly blamed Tehran for inflaming the local Shiite unrest that has persisted since early 2011, when a crackdown by Bahraini security forces was reinforced by paramilitary and police units from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, thinly justified as helping a fellow GCC state in need.

For their part, Qatar and Oman share offshore natural gas fields with Iran, which likely explains their more nuanced stances (e.g., Qatar notoriously invited Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the 2007 GCC summit in Doha). Yet in other cases, territorial issues have been more intractable. Exploitation of the Dora gas field in the northern Gulf, at a point where the waters of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iran meet, has been delayed by failure to agree on how the field should be divided. And the UAE has a long-running dispute with Tehran over three islands in the southern Gulf, seized by the shah when British forces left the area in 1970. The strategic position of these islands, astride the main shipping lanes, underpins the concern of Washington and other capitals that Iran could disrupt the flow of oil and gas to international markets, principally the Asian markets that rely on Gulf supplies.

TESTS FOR THE SUMMIT

Several factors will indicate the mood of participants at this week's summit:

1. If King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia attends. The GCC is dear to the monarch's heart -- a golden globe with the flags of fellow member states often sits on a side table when he meets with important visitors. But the ninety-year-old leader is in poor health, and his absence would imply a health crisis that would be worrisome for the kingdom as well as GCC unity.

2. If Sultan Qaboos of Oman does not attend. The Omani leader's frequent absence from GCC summits would not normally be an issue, but this year it would imply that Tehran, which Qaboos visited in August, has succeeded in splitting the GCC. The fissures are already obvious. At the Bahrain security conference, Oman's representative stated that his country opposed making the GCC into a union, which would require greater practical and symbolic commitments from member states: "We will not prevent a union, but if it happens we will not be part of it."

3. The role of Qatar. The summit could show whether Qatar has changed from a maverick to a team player following the ruler's abdication in favor of his thirty-three-year-old son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, earlier this year. It will also be interesting to see whether a Qatari proposal at the Bahrain security conference -- that the GCC should have a seat at the Iran nuclear talks, forming a "P5+2" group -- gains traction.

4. The prominence of Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been supporting anti-Assad rebels, and Riyadh was particularly disappointed by the Obama administration's flip-flop on Syrian chemical weapons. Yet it is not clear whether Syria has become a GCC-wide issue.

5. References to popular protests in other Arab countries. As autocracies with constrained forums for political representation, the Gulf Arab states have looked on in horror at the chaos in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. They regard their own traditional ways -- dispensing oil-funded handouts to petitioning citizens -- as a more reliable way of responding to burgeoning protests. But these methods are under strain: the UAE has been reduced to mass trials of opposition activists, while the Bahraini government appears increasingly hardline, barring leaders of the main Shiite party from the Manama security conference (though several foreign delegations organized their own contacts with Shiite figures outside the venue).

6. References to Israel in the final communique. Official GCC summit statements typically include boilerplate condemnations of Israel, in terms of both the Palestinian situation and nuclear weapons. In recent weeks, however, Israeli president Shimon Peres spoke via satellite to an official conference in the UAE, and Saudi spokesmen have acknowledged the congruence of Israel and the kingdom's positions on the Iranian nuclear issue. Therefore, GCC leaders run the risk of appearing detached from reality unless the ritual condemnation of Israel is absent or more subtle this time.

U.S. POLICY

GCC leaders are mindful of their security relationships with the United States but appear frustrated by Washington's dissimilar thinking on how to deal with Iran. And the Manama visits by Secretary Hagel and Deputy Secretary Burns -- neither of whom is considered an Obama administration insider -- cannot have been very reassuring to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that have become accustomed to close access. Until Hagel's brief visit to Riyadh earlier today, the only announced U.S. trips to Saudi Arabia since the Geneva agreement have been by Senators Robert Corker and John McCain, Republican members of the Foreign Relations Committee and critics of White House policy on Iran. Each received a warm welcome in Riyadh, where meetings were arranged with Defense Minister Crown Prince Salman, Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, and two of King Abdullah's most significant sons, National Guard Minister Prince Mitab bin Abdullah and Deputy Foreign Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah.

Meanwhile, Washington's current regional defense posture continues to hinge on Bahrain, which hosts the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet. While visiting the island this weekend, Hagel voiced a statement of U.S. commitment to the region, but he did so from the deck of the USS *Ponce*, an old amphibious transport ship converted to antimine duties that was dwarfed by an Italian aircraft carrier also visiting Bahrain. And he may have inadvertently sent mixed signals on Iran, urging the GCC to buy into a collective missile defense agreement -- a move implying that Iran is a continuing threat -- at a time when Washington is emphasizing optimism on the nuclear issue.

In the Gulf region, perhaps even more so than many other parts of the world, effective diplomacy is personal diplomacy. This relationship is reinforced by the sense that the home government is listening to the messages sent back by its ambassadors and envoys. Yet the Gulf states appear to feel that their relationship with Washington is under strain, and confirmation of the extent of this problem may well emerge at this week's summit in Kuwait.

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