

# Between Iran and the Gulf: An Environment in Transition

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In the Gulf region, a state of tension prevails regarding what has become of the Arab world. Fears are also growing of Iran's strength, population, regional expansion, semi-revolutionary ideology, increasingly institutionalized political system, and nuclear agreement. Moreover, Iran has actively involved itself in both realms, using its power to gradually bolster Assad's regime after the Syrian popular revolution and support the Houthis in Yemen after their seizure most of the country. After the 2003 war, Iran has also begun to shift the power balance in Iraq in its favor, in addition to its role in Lebanon and Syria through Hezbollah.

Since the beginning of King Salman's reign in early 2015, Saudi Arabia—the largest and most densely populated of the Gulf States with over 27 million citizens, which also boasts the Gulf's strongest military—has been plunged into clashes on numerous fronts. Saudi Arabia is employing its capabilities to defend its interpretation of security after the past half-decade's violent disturbances to regional and Gulf security. This has drawn out more assertive approaches within Saudi leadership, especially from the crown prince and the deputy crown prince, with the goal of ensuring that the Gulf region aligns itself with Saudi Arabia and avoids any disagreements between the states. In this new regional climate, Saudi Arabia is less tolerant of radical differences between the stances of Gulf countries.

This new attitude reflects the Gulf under Saudi leadership's two new threats: it simultaneously faces challenges from Iran on one hand and ISIS on the other. The latter threat is attracting a segment of youth from within Saudi Arabia, as well as Jordan and Tunisia. Moreover, the group has a religious foundation that is in many ways similar to the official religious foundations of the Saudi kingdom. In a less extreme case, the Gulf is also divided on how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular due to the group's status as an organization structured outside of the formal political system. Despite the Saudi-Muslim Brotherhood dispute, the Kingdom has dealt with the group in Yemen since 2015. Other Gulf countries oppose the Muslim Brotherhood in light of their alliances with Egypt, even as Qatar stands apart by supporting both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian opposition.

On the other side of the coin, the Gulf has recently classified Hezbollah as a terrorist organization as sectarian tensions with Shiites in the region have grown. The tension is a reflection of the Saudi-Iranian conflict, but also developed as a result of the weak democratic and justice mechanisms that exist within most state policies and societies in the Arab world. These mechanisms bred marginalization and discrimination against Shiite sects. They

are now public issues facing the region, affecting the area's various tribal, regional, and sectarian constituencies. In a way, marginalization has become a regular component of Arab life, which has in turn shaped the regional political dynamic between Iran and the Saudi-led Arab coalition.

Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is not necessarily far from reaching a compromise with Iran. The country is directing its efforts towards shifting the balance of power back in its favor and collecting whatever pressure points it can use to stop Iranian expansion, such as building stronger ties with Turkey. The Kingdom realizes that Iran will remain as a regional player and has thus maintained a pragmatic approach towards it. The goal of the current Saudi and Gulf movement is a strategic repositioning of the Arab world relative to its pre-Arab Spring position. Yet this is a pursuit fraught with internal and regional challenges, which fails to take into consideration the extent of the popular change that has defined – and still defines – the Arab world since the 2011 revolutions.

Naturally, not all Gulf countries share Saudi Arabia's vision regarding the regional and Iranian balance of power. Distinctions have emerged due to geography and the different perspectives of leaders in Qatar, the Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman. It is thus natural that, once wars settle and talk of solutions, agreements, and economics begins, these intra-Gulf differences will come to the foreground. The simple act of the Sultanate of Oman securing the negotiations that led to the American and Western agreement with Iran is proof of these contradictions. Similarly, Kuwait's creation of the space for negotiations between disputing parties and Houthis in Yemen presents another outlying view. The Gulf countries are in relative agreement regarding their dread of Iranian expansion – they all fear the surrounding civil wars and the impact of American withdrawal. They seek a joint Arab-Islamic framework that posits a certain level of safety and stability; yet until now, they have failed to reach an agreement regarding the necessity of medium-term political reform.

Besides the new specter of sectarian threats, the 2011 Arab revolutions roused fear within the Gulf of new technological tools like Twitter and Facebook, as well as of politics and partisan mobilization, regardless of how elementary. With few exceptions, laws restricting freedoms have increased throughout the Gulf, especially concerning new media.

Bahraini society is currently horizontally fragmented between its Sunni and Shiite members. In Kuwait, where citizens have enjoyed better-established freedoms, its peaceful political movement dwindled after the state rejected and clamped down on the movement in 2011. The movement's demands frightened Kuwait's political and business elite; however, it simultaneously raised important questions regarding lackluster development and administration, the spread of corruption, and necessity of providing greater freedoms – including the establishment of parties. Kuwaiti youth movements also called for Kuwait to transition to rule by a prime minister elected through party competition following constitutional reform. In response, activists were jailed, and verdicts were issued against hundreds of young people. Some of those prosecuted have fled Kuwait, others are waiting for their sentences, and yet others are currently serving time in prison. Nevertheless, Kuwaiti advocating has continued. In April 2016, a union strike shook oil manufacturing in Kuwait. A total of 18,000 laborers and employees participated in the strike after Kuwaiti workers' rights and gains were reduced due to the oil price crisis. Any political solution to the crisis in Bahrain and the contradictions in Kuwait proposed and developed by government leadership will create two models that are more progressive in terms of rights and policies. This is what is expected by the two countries' societies, both of which are highly aware and have significant civil experience. As of yet, neither country has moved towards developing this type of political solution.

This new Gulf climate has left everyone in a regional and local bind. Egypt's role has regressed despite massive Saudi support, exceeding tens of billions of dollars since the Sisi-led coup in 2013. Similarly, many Arab countries have become failed states as a result of dictatorship and corruption – all within the context of the regional weapons proliferation. Prior to 2011, it was sufficient for Gulf and other Arab leaders to solve domestic and regional problems

through a few telephone calls that could easily dissipate intra-regional differences. Today, conflict prompts war and harsh laws against opponents and critics. In the past, Gulf countries never had to fence themselves in, as Saudi Arabia is now doing along its borders with Iraq and Yemen. These new fences are proof of a lack of conviction regarding the possibility of real solutions to chronic regional problems; instead, the fences and walls create harsh contradictions both domestically and externally.

Another example: in the past, an understanding between Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia stabilized Lebanon and ended the country's civil war. Today, Saudi Arabia has declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization and has halted any support to the Lebanese army. Meanwhile, the war in Syria is nearing its sixth year. Oil prices, which used to rouse optimism in the region, now suggest—according to numerous reports and studies—that they will not return to levels seen in 2015 for many years. The oil price crisis is now presenting the additional issue of the economic and political transitions of rentier states.

With the absence of regionally negotiated peace, the present wars in the Gulf, regardless of proposed justifications, may end with partial victories or major disappointments. Even military victory can sometimes come with political defeat due to the war's cost and the damages of attrition. The Yemen war is a prime example. The conflict itself is rife with contradictions, the most important of which being al-Qaeda's control of Southern Yemen and its creation of a state that resembles the state structure of ISIS. Similarly complicated is the prospective growth of the Southern Movement at the expense of future unity between the North and South. It is likely that in such a climate, Saudi Arabia felt the need to execute al-Qaeda members and Saudi Shiite leaders. But execution as a punishment for political violence, terrorism, or severe opposition in both Iran—highest in the world—and Saudi Arabia only feeds the conflicts and creates a foundation for increased radicalism on all sides. In the foreseeable future, the result will likely be a mix of balance and imbalance, gains and losses.

These manifold conflicts, hidden and overt, demonstrate that the Iranian-Gulf conflict is only one aspect of the current state of the Arab world. Based on Saudi Arabia's vision for regional stability, its attempts to build a major Islamic coalition comprised of Egypt, Sudan, Pakistan, and other Islamic countries are filled with positive aspects; however, even if this approach is realistically the only viable measure to move forward, these allied states are themselves unstable, especially due to their negative human rights record. Egypt specifically faces the threat of activity against its government in the context of an absence of even the bare minimum of human rights. If the lack of freedoms in these states continue, the region will face additional militarization and confrontation between security states that fear change and their peoples who are working to build more open and balanced societies. This dialectic between violence and peace, the security state and the democratic state, will not leave the Arab world. And it will ultimately be one of the reasons behind the Arab countries' inability to shut the door on Iran's regional involvement.

Part of the regional struggle has transformed into an Iranian-Arab conflict, but the deeper Arab crisis is reflected in a political climate that helps pave the way for external interference and side conflicts, regardless of origin. The Shiite-Sunni struggle erupted within this framework, but Shiites will not disappear off the map, and neither will Sunnis exit the equation. Over time, the conflict can only lead to compromises – compromises not only in terms of Iran, but also on the rights of Shiites and Sunnis as citizens of countries that extend over their membership of sects, tribes, or regional groupings. Future compromises will focus on the contradiction between open and closed societies, as well as political guarantees for the voiceless. Undoubtedly, everything in the future will return to the essential question behind the 2011 Arab Spring: the place of participation, expression, freedoms, legal guarantees, justice, the marginalized, assemblies, parliaments, elections, and the free economy in nations that should be open to everyone.

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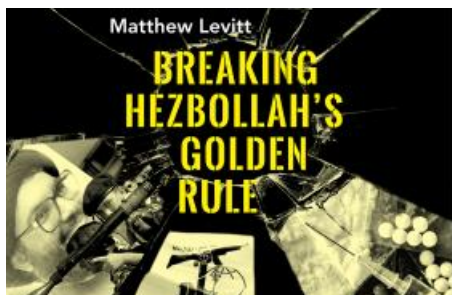
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