



## SMA Reach-back Report

### Gulf Cooperation Council Stability & Influence

**Question (R5.5):** *How stable is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and to what extent can the United States rely on the GCC to influence foreign policy objectives in the region? What are the implications of the changing dynamics between GCC members?*

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## Executive Summary

Weston Aviles, NSI

The Qatari crisis that is presently crippling the GCC has decayed logarithmically into diplomatic ultimatums and blockades, with Kuwait and Oman attempting to restore relations between Doha and the rest of the GCC. While the crisis has reached a relative standstill, the GCC is experiencing the “most severe test of the organization’s cohesion in its nearly forty-year history,” (Feierstein) and the entire affair calls into question the cohesion of the GCC and its potential to advance US interests. The GCC has been a fickle partner for US foreign policy objectives in the past and with political infighting and gridlock, Iranian encroachment, and a host of domestic issues, the GCC appears to be on the cusp of a historic transformation. All contributors in this report suggest that Iran is the primary cause of GCC discord and emphasize different causes and effects, as well as different paths of pursuing policy conducive to American interests.

Fractures within the GCC, which have flared several times since its inception in 1981, have resulted in the failure of the GCC to “make headway on major issues that touched upon sensitive areas of political, security, or foreign policy control,” Feierstein argues in agreement with several other contributors (Aviles, experts from the Global Cultural Knowledge Network [GCKN], Styszynski, and Ulrichsen). There are several factors that the authors note as the root cause for the GCC’s ineffectiveness besides Iranian antagonism. First, member nations disagree over the nature of political Islam vis-à-vis domestic presence and engagement of transnational religious groups (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood) and various elements of the Houthi rebel leadership (Feierstein). Second, economic disputes underpinned by “competitive bilateralism” and a lack of interdependency has produced a lack of economic cohesion (Ulrichsen). Third, the authoritarian and disparate natures of the Gulf regimes decay the integrity of the GCC union and discourage cooperation and make compromise difficult (Aviles).

Authors disagree about the permanence and depth of the fissures within the GCC. One school of thought suggests that the alienation of Qatar intentionally “intensified by the Saudis and Emirates” has

permanently damaged the organization while others believe it has only been temporarily weakened (GCKN, Shaikh). A deeper discussion of the division within the GCC (with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain on one side, Qatar and Oman on the other with Kuwait in the middle) is a theme mentioned in a related SMA Reach Back response (R4.8)<sup>1</sup> and is also discussed by Feierstein, Ulrichsen, and Aviles. These groupings are posited as a possible end state of the formal dissolution of GCC (Ulrichsen, Aviles) with Dr. Feierstein's analysis even suggests such an outcome as possible if not likely. Regardless of the final result, all contributors agree that more turmoil is inevitable.

The Qatari crisis is seemingly a symptom of both the Sunni-Shia conflict and other regional/international politics, as well as the internal divisions that prevent the GCC efficiently resolving major disagreements. All of the aforementioned factors (and others) have ultimately created a less than desirable environment for US foreign policy. Several authors make the case for the GCC as being a poor partner for implementing US objectives in the region (GCKN, Feierstein, Serwer, and Aviles), with experts from the Global Cultural Knowledge Network going as far as contending that "America and the GCC do not have the same objectives so we can only influence the GCC through FMS [foreign military sales]." Ulrichsen and Aviles suggest that there is an opportunity to engage individual member states and elements therein, with Aviles criticizing the framework of diplomatic engagement with the GCC bloc instead of leveraging individual member states for foreign policy objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Aviles, W. (Ed.). (2017). GCC Nations: Impediments to Cooperation. SMA CENTCOM Reach Back Response. Retrieved from <http://nsiteam.com/gcc-nations-impediments-to-cooperation/>

## Subject Matter Expert Contributions

Weston Aviles

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The GCC is an organization that at best reflects an apathetic commune of political and economic convenience and, at worst, is a half-hearted and ill-devised institution destined for internal decay and ripe for foreign influence. Hastily assembled and poorly constructed, the GCC had, at one time, the potential to coordinate regional development, defense, and foster political unity among Arab Gulf nations and their Sunni allies. To some degree, the Council has accomplished these objectives. The GCC consists of six Gulf nations that stand to benefit enormously from cooperation with one another on diplomatic, political, economic, and security issues. Notwithstanding, both the high and low points of GCC unity reflect the ultimate goal of the organization lying in the survival of each distinct monarchical rule and therein lies the weak foundation of the GCC. Not even during the birth of the GCC in the course of the Iran-Iraq war, subsequent aggression from Saddam's Iraq, and "rallying around the Al Khalifa monarchy during the 2011 uprising in Bahrain" did the GCC demonstrate the lofty goal of Arab-Gulf solidarity (Martini, Wasser, Kaye, Egel, & Ogletree, 2016, p. 10), but rather showed only the penchant of Gulf monarchies to pursue the most accessible policies that preserve the stability of their own regimes.

Despite the face-value similarities of GCC nations, there exist stark differences among member states that are ripe to be exploited by Iran, discontent minorities, and other powers encroaching on the Gulf security complex (e.g., Turkey, Russia, and China). Within the GCC, there are significant differences in domestic Shia populations with Bahrain boasting a Shia majority (other member nations between 5-25%) (Pew Forum, 2009) and non-national populations that range from 88.5% in the UAE and 32.7% in Saudi Arabia (GLMM, 2015). Disparities of petroleum and other natural resources exist in the GCC with Saudi Arabia hosting the largest production of petroleum products, followed by the UAE and Kuwait, and then Qatar and Oman. With the exception of Oman, all GCC nations experience domestic turmoil arising from petroleum economies and are prone to high levels of "volatility resulting from unpredictable commodity price swings in such resource dependent economies" (Almusehel & Alfawzan, 2017, p. 3). GCC nations also differ through varying degrees of strategic proximity to Iran as well as flashpoints of conflict in the Arab/Persian Gulf and Yemen. Qatar, for instance, shares the world's largest natural gas field with Iran, and the Strait of Hormuz is a vital concern for Qatar and Kuwait as well as petroleum consumers worldwide. Saudi Arabia claims military supremacy by spending more than five times as much on defense than the UAE, followed by Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain (Jarzabek, 2016), while Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain have the most US troops stationed in their territory (McCarthy, 2017). All of these are existential polarities that would present monumental challenges for any inter-governmental organization (IGO) to function, let alone an IGO that has yet to even achieve a monetary union (despite the significant efforts to do so).

Regardless of the structural and bureaucratic issues inherent to any IGO, the ultimate flaws of the GCC lie in the authoritarian nature of each member nation. Maintaining competent administration through illiberal governance, in a rapidly modernizing societal landscape is difficult enough without the threat of proxy wars, religious extremism, and a whole host of other dilemmas facing GCC nations. Any institution that contends with such a diverse group of issues and crises, and whose member states often have competing interests and political calculi that value regime survival of select elites over cooperation, is bound to be severely handicapped and fundamentally flawed. The GCC is likely to continue its stagnant

inability to cope with both the crises of the Quartet-Qatar standoff and find an agreeable and collective solution to the Yemen conflict. Either the division will deepen within the GCC, Iran will turn back on its aggressive posture and actions across the Gulf, or, finally, the fundamental nature of all GCC governments will shift into more a monolithic enterprise dominated by fewer competing actors. With the tenacity and leverage Iran has demonstrated through proxy threats and geo-strategic maneuvering, Tehran has been able to exert incredible strain on GCC nations and GCC cohesion respectively; given such success (and with little cost to Iran), it is unlikely that the current paradigm of Persian aggression will stop.

Defining American policy objectives in the region is a difficult matter unto itself, be can be roughly defined as counterterrorism, containing Iranian influence, and preserving a relatively cooperative disposition of GCC nations to Washington. Engaging the GCC as the primary vehicle and instrument for these foreign policy objectives is both ineffective and ultimately is not the current practice of American diplomacy. Sustaining a measure of order and peace among GCC nations so as to not distract their resolve and faculty to oppose Iran is certainly worthwhile, but given the divide over the Yemeni and Qatar conflicts, this will be onerous to achieve. Possessing a realpolitik outlook on what each GCC nation can offer to US interests both separately and together is a worthwhile exercise for US policy makers; such analysis will likely demonstrate that not all regional interests put the same value on GCC cohesion. Viewing US goals in the Gulf through the prism of the GCC cohesion is not as helpful as considering which nations in the Gulf (and elsewhere) are prone to acquiesce to Iranian influence, host Islamists, or otherwise retain an unfriendly proclivity to the US. There are possible scenarios where Qatar departs the GCC in amicable fashion and eventually lead to progress in the region; however, it seems unlikely. A more realistic possibility is a drawn-out cooling period between GCC members that is vulnerable to further exacerbation from Tehran. Given the current course, the hegemony of Saudi Arabia will likely grow as Qatar, Oman, and even Kuwait fracture from the GCC, and this again demonstrates that the US should be ready and willing to implement a dynamic strategy to pursue foreign policy post hoc. Decision makers in the DOD should understand that the US can count on GCC member nations to act in their own best interests rather than depending on them as a political bloc to execute political objectives.

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## Global Cultural Knowledge Network

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Contribution from a number of anonymized GCKN experts:

The current spat between Qatar and Saudi Arabia threatens to temporarily weaken, but not unravel, the GCC. Iran's growing influence in the region will ensure that the GCC survives.

The GCC is not stable enough to actually effect regional policy. Yemen has damaged the positive ability of the council to pull together in a consistent manner and effort. Qatar is trying to be independent, but they are experiencing there is a limited area for independence between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Implications are a tighter pro-Saudi Gulf faction that will be forced to work together as they see the US moving away from its role as the Gulf protector. This is directly linked to the response to the question below.

“Q4 - How should US foreign policy evolve in the region post-ISIS? What are the dynamics in the region and what will be the implications of this for the USG?”

Define US interests in the region, at least internally. Why are we opposed to Iran? What do we want in Mesopotamia or the Arabian Peninsula or the Levant? The answers to these questions are unclear to both US service members and to people in the region. This lack of clarity hampers commitment to US actions. Countries and non-state actors are hedging their bets when asked to partner with the US, because it is unclear to what end.

US leaders may have to hold senior-level discussions to define their mutual objectives in the Mediterranean region and assess their tools and levers of influence. A promising format for these discussions might be to come together to adopt the strong sanctions regime that ultimately brought Iran to the negotiating table – a diplomatic feat that required extensive diplomacy to convince all parties not to cave in to their individual interests for conducting business with Iran.

Books are written to answer this question. Either unite more fully with the Gulf states or warm relations considerably with Iran and chill relations with the Gulf states.”

America and the GCC do not have the same objectives so we can only influence the GCC through FMS. We are really quite irrelevant and the Arabs mostly humor us in return for hardware, training etc.

**Gerald Feierstein**  
Middle East Institute

The current dispute between Qatar and the self-described Quartet – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain plus Egypt – aligned against it is the most severe test of the organization’s cohesion in its nearly forty-year history. Not only its stability but its viability will depend on the circumstances of the dispute’s resolution. Undoubtedly, damage has already been done to the integrity of the GCC amidst mud-slinging media campaigns, overheated rhetoric, and back-and-forth allegations of interference in each other’s internal affairs. In the short term, however, a resolution of the dispute that allows both sides to save face and claim that they have achieved an honorable outcome will likely minimize the extent and duration of the damage. Conversely, an outcome that leaves one side branded “the loser” in the contest might spell the end of the organization completely or, at the very least, spark Qatar’s withdrawal from the group.

Despite the focus on the specific allegations against Qatar, however, the fractures within the GCC are broader than the issue of Qatar’s behavior and raise doubts about the ability of the GCC to speak with one voice either on issues of defense and security or on a coordinated approach to core foreign policy goals and objectives. Differences within the organization are particularly acute regarding Iran. Qatar, whose economic prosperity is dependent on its shared management with Iran of the huge North Field natural gas reserves, is not the outlier within the GCC regarding relations with Iran. Oman has long enjoyed a close relationship with Iran and has resisted pressure from the other Gulf states to adopt an anti-Iranian stance. Frustration within the GCC over Oman’s independent position on Iran has spilled over into differences of approach in the Yemen conflict. The Omanis are sympathetic to the pro-Iranian Houthi rebels confronting the Saudi-led Coalition and have been accused by the Coalition of facilitating Iranian support to the Houthis. Although more circumspect in articulating its differences with its larger Gulf neighbors, Kuwait, too, has adopted a more nuanced position regarding Iran and has been a principal advocate of a GCC-Iran dialogue aimed at reducing regional tensions.

Political Islam is another issue that fractures GCC consensus. While the Quartet has couched its complaint about Qatari actions as “support for terrorism,” the real anger is aimed at Qatar’s apparent sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated groups like Hamas that Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, in particular, sees as threatening the survival of Gulf monarchies. But even within the Quartet there are differences of view regarding political Islam. As noted, the UAE and Egypt have adopted the hardest line position on political Islam. Their hostility reflects their hostility to the Arab Spring and the success that the Muslim Brotherhood had particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. (Another Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Islah, was part of a coalition of opposition parties that toppled Ali Abdullah Saleh’s government in Yemen.) But the Saudis have traditionally been more circumspect about the MB and political Islam in general. Differences between Saudi and Emirati perspectives on the MB have colored their engagements in Yemen. The Saudis have welcomed senior Islah figures to Saudi Arabia, most notably General Ali Mohsin, who they backed as the Vice President of the legitimate Yemeni government, and they have demonstrated a readiness to incorporate Islahi units into the coalition fighting the Houthis. The UAE, in contrast, has opposed Islah’s inclusion in the anti-Houthi fight and supported rival Yemeni factions that have attacked Islahi offices and other facilities in areas under Emirati control. Nevertheless, there have been signs in recent weeks that the Saudi position is coming into closer alignment with the Emirati perspective. The Saudis have cracked down on dissenting voices within Saudi Arabia, including prominent preachers, claiming that they are associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and represent challenges to the legitimacy of Al Saud rule.

These differences of policy within the GCC are not new. Until now, however, the group has proved flexible in accommodating different perspectives among the member states, even on issues central to its *raison d'être* like Iran. But the Quartet's harsh rhetoric and aggressive action against Qatar over policy differences are new and raise questions about the future direction of the organization. Is the campaign against Qatar, in fact, an opening shot by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to try to force policy conformity on the other members of the group? Could that effort go so far as to include destabilizing and fomenting regime change in recalcitrant capitals? Not only the Qataris but Oman and Kuwait as well are considering this possibility nervously. The Kuwaitis and Omanis might consider that they are particularly vulnerable to that kind of pressure. Both are facing likely leadership changes in the coming period and neither the successor to the Sultan nor the successor to Sheikh Sabah is likely to enjoy either the strong domestic support or the international recognition of the incumbents. The transition in Kuwait and Muscat could be exploited by the Saudis and Emiratis in an effort to force the two governments to conform to Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's policy preferences. Possibly as a reflection of their concerns about the future, both Kuwait and Oman are working to mitigate the impact on Qatar of the Quartet's pressure tactics. The Kuwaitis are attempting to mediate the intra-GCC differences while the Omanis are aiding Qatar's efforts to avoid the worst impacts of the Quartet's economic blockade. (Interestingly, as a secondary benefit, Oman's economic engagement with Qatar will likely limit Iran's ability to fish in the GCC's troubled waters although, in fairness, the Saudis and Emiratis may not see it that way.)

The internal contradictions within the GCC have often been seen not only by the members of the organization but also by its outside partners, especially the U.S., as a reflection of its weakness. The fact that the GCC has been forced to adopt lowest common denominator positions on critical issues has limited its ability to be a reliable partner in a number of cases, especially in the defense and security arena. But it may turn out in the end that this perceived "weakness" is, in fact, the GCC's strength. By accepting that the individual members of the GCC will maintain their independent policies on an array of issues, and allowing members to opt out of the consensus on specific policies, the GCC has been able to maintain itself as a comprehensive, albeit loosely organized, association of the predominantly Sunni Arab Gulf states. Should the Saudis and Emiratis seek to change the basic nature of the GCC and force conformity where it doesn't exist, including in areas that other member states view as touching on their vital national interests, it would raise questions whether the Qataris, Omanis, and (less likely) Kuwaitis see continued benefit from their participation in the group. Ironically, therefore, a Saudi/Emirati push for GCC dominance may spell the demise of the organization, i.e., "destroying the GCC in order to save it."

Daniel Serwer  
Middle East Institute

Dynamics in the GCC haven't changed all that much. Oman and Qatar always favored better relations with Iran than Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Bahrain. Kuwait was always in the middle. What has changed is the intensity of the disagreement, which the Saudis and Emiratis intentionally escalated, in response to POTUS's ill-considered request that they do something about terrorist financing. Always easier to bludgeon someone else than to clear up your own act. The GCC will not be an effective military or diplomatic instrument against Iran, despite the members' voluminous arms purchases, for many years to come.

## Mubin Shaikh

Independent

The GCC maintains at least a basic utility to implement most objectives. This will continue as they themselves try to manage the influence of Iran. Recent squabbles with Qatar will be patched up eventually but Iran will continue to push back against Saudi Arabia; up to and including aggressive cyber operations and traditional human intelligence. Saudi Arabia may well see an increase in attacks on Saudi cities by Iranian agents as well as Houthi missiles. The GCC needs the protection, weaponry and training from the U.S. and these things will ideally, contribute to their overall stability.

## Martin Styszynski

Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland)

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981 in Saudi Arabia as consequences of Iran's revolution in 1979. Main objectives of the organization reflect political, military and economic unification, including implementation of single currency, common custom services and administrative regulations.

In fact, GCC is still facing Shia-Sunni rivalry, especially in the context of Iran's foreign policy, that interferes in GCC's member states, especially in interests of the main Iran's ideological and political opponent from Saudi Arabia, that dominates its neighbors in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates or Oman. Tehran exploits Shia communities in particular countries such as Bahrain or Yemen. It was evident during the Arab Spring in 2011 in Bahrain, when Shia movements protested in Manama streets against Sunni minority from Khalifa's monarchy. Khalifa's rule remained, thanks to military and political support from Riyadh.

Houthi's uprising (one of Shia trends) in Yemen and takeover of Sana in 2015 made the inter-religious crisis worse. Military intervention of the Arab coalition under Saudi Arabia's command in Yemen disturbed GCC's political scene and affected economic situation of the Saudi Kingdom, especially in the context of transformation programs and non-oil revenues based on Vision 2030 initiatives. Besides, GCC's member states like Kuwait or Oman engaged in the debate concerning peaceful initiatives and various diplomatic solutions to solve the Yemeni conflict. For instance, Oman opted for negotiations involving all sides of the conflict including Houthi, Iran, Saudi Arabia and worldwide recognized government of the president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in Aden. Oman is also accused of conspiracy with Iran and support for Houthi militias. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates is engaged in military actions against Houthi in the north and jihadist groups in the south of Yemen.

It should be also pointed out that Tehran and its allies take political and media advantages of the tragic humanitarian situation in Yemen, growing numbers of casualties and increase of cholera cases, which affect worldwide public opinion and authorities, which rethink military support for Saudi Arabia and selling of intelligent weapons.

Moreover, Shia populations living in the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia also became a useful platform for foreign interferences of Iran. The regular attacks against local security services in Qatif city and surveillance of local Shia clerics aim at destabilizing the situation of the Kingdom. For example, in December 2016 the local cleric Mohammad al-Jirani was kidnapped by unknown group. According to investigations al-Jirani supported local Shia interests instead of Shia populations living abroad.

Recently, Saudi police has captured two insurgents involved in series of terrorist plots and cooperation with the group Hezbollah Al-Hejaz responsible for the Khobar Tower bombing in 1996 that killed 19 US Air Force personnel.

GCC is also affected by Qatar crisis, which weakens the stability of the organization and membership of each country. The crisis is exploited by main regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran. Riyadh sustains economic blockade and ban of land or air transportation for Qatar's companies. Food or medical supplies were replaced by Tehran and Oman. Iran also declared that it is ready to intensify bilateral relations with Doha. Qatari monarchy has also decided to withdraw its troops from Yemen.

Moreover, the Qatar crisis might be used by US opponent in the Gulf- Russia, which tries expand its economic presence in the Gulf, especially in exploitation of Qatari gas fields shared by Iran. The long-term Russian scenario in the Middle East assumes expansion of gas pipelines from the Gulf through gas fields in Iraq, Iran or Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. This scenario creates potential threats and economic competitions for other Gulf States and their Western allies.

The regional rivalry between Iran and GCC is also a side effect of global tendencies regarding reactivation of spheres of domination between the US (and its allies from Europe and NATO) and Russia (and China, BRICS countries and some Middle East countries). The competitions in the Gulf demonstrate political separation between the West and the East. In fact, we should expect the growing impact of this division in the near future.

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen  
Rice University

Four months into the standoff initiated on June 5 by the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the initial flurry of diplomatic and economic sanctions on Qatar has given way to a series of highly inflammatory informal measures. The shift from formal to informal is most likely a reflection of the quartet's failure to secure the support of the United States or broad sections of the Arab and Islamic world for the isolation of Qatar. Whereas it is not yet clear whether this miscalculation will rebound on the dynamic leadership styles of the Crown Princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the highly personalized and bitterly acrimonious nature of the dispute threatens to inflict generational damage on the social fabric of Gulf societies. Thirty-six years of incremental technocratic cooperation is at risk as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) faces its most severe crisis since the bloc came together at great speed in response to external threats to regional security in May 1981.

While these achievements provided a strong technocratic basis for regional cooperation they left unaddressed a set of deeper structural challenges that consistently have undermined the alignment of policymaking within the GCC. Public sector dominance of GCC states' labor markets contributed to low cross-border mobility, as did low-levels of internal trade within the GCC and the persistence of different legal and regulatory frameworks among the six Gulf States. A 'competitive bilateralism' in trade deals and arms sales also frustrated attempts to create a collective GCC platform as agreements occurred between individual states rather than with the bloc. Saudi officials reacted with fury to Bahrain's negotiations with the George W. Bush administration for a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States in 2004, with the Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, stating that such agreements "weaken not only the solidarity of the GCC as a whole but also each of its members."

Beyond the technocratic 'nuts and bolts' of regional cooperation, the GCC has failed to make headway on major issues that touched upon sensitive areas of political, security, or foreign policy control. A prime example occurred in 2009 when nearly two decades of work toward a single currency and monetary union foundered in acrimony after the UAE suddenly withdrew from the project, less than a year before it was due to launch in 2010. The UAE had campaigned hard to host the GCC Central Bank in Abu Dhabi and reacted with anger to the May 2009 decision to site the bank in Riyadh instead. The UAE Minister of Economy, Sultan bin Saeed al-Mansouri, stated bluntly that "the non-selection of the UAE for hosting the GCC Central Bank did not take into consideration the state's importance and its economic development."

The Emirati withdrawal from the GCC's flagship initiative illustrates the core-periphery imbalance at the heart of the GCC between Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and the five smaller Gulf States on the other. Most other Gulf States have had territorial disputes with Saudi Arabia at varying points over the past century, from Kuwait in the 1920s to Abu Dhabi and Oman in the 1950s and skirmishes on the Saudi-Qatari border in 1992 and 1993, and, far more recently, a brief clash between Saudi and Emirati vessels in 2010. Each of these incidents has served as a reminder of the power imbalance between the Kingdom and its neighbors and contributed to a reluctance to see the GCC become too Saudi-centric in the eyes of its smaller members. Kuwait resisted attempts both in 1982 and 1994 to create a unified internal security mechanism while in 2013 Oman flatly refused to be a part of the closer political integration championed at that point by Saudi leaders.

Problematically for the GCC, the current crisis over Qatar is only likely to magnify the sense of concern among ruling circles in Gulf capitals at their vulnerability to pressure to fall into line behind a more regionally interventionist Saudi Arabia. The elevation of Mohammed bin Salman to Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, several weeks into the standoff, and the close bond he has formed with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi, suggests that the thrusting assertiveness of Saudi-Emirati policymaking looks set to define an 'inner rod' within the Gulf for years, if not decades, to come. Officials in Kuwait and Oman have long sought a careful balance in regional and international affairs, and led attempts earlier in 2017 to reach out to President Rouhani to identify measures to de-escalate Iran-GCC tensions; both may now wonder if they might come under greater pressure to adopt more hawkish positions they long have tried to avoid.

A related challenge for the future viability of the GCC is that the institution seemingly has been bypassed at every stage of the crisis since its inception in May with the 'hacking' of the Qatar News Agency. From the listing of initial grievances against Qatar to the formulation of the thirteen conditions and the Kuwaiti and American attempts to mediate, both the GCC and its Secretary-General have been conspicuously absent from the debate. Mechanisms within the GCC that might have acted as channels for the expression and resolution of the dispute have been unused as policies have been made in national capitals and bypassed the GCC altogether. Moving forward, Qatari officials would be forgiven for rethinking the utility of belonging to an organization that was either unable or unwilling to prevent three of its members from turning on a fourth.

The lack of new formal measures against Qatar as the crisis has unfolded has meant that the Anti-Terror Quartet has relied instead on a combination of informal tactics that risk damaging beyond repair the bonds of social cohesion and ties of trust between Qataris and their three neighbors. The vitriolic attacks on Qatar in sections of the Quartet's media routinely refer to the 'Qatari regime' in language hitherto unprecedented against a fellow ruling family in the Gulf. Recent attempts to present Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali Al Thani, a Saudi-based much younger half-brother of a former Emir ousted by the present Emir's grandfather in 1972, as the 'legitimate' ruler of Qatar, represents an inflammatory attempt to intervene in the domestic affairs of another GCC member state, ironically one of the main charges on the list of grievances made against Qatar by the Quartet.

All parties to the standoff appear, at the time of writing, to be unwilling to back away and risk losing face in doing so. It is reasonable to assume that the stalemate will continue for many months to come; it took eight months to resolve a previous coordinated withdrawal of Ambassadors from Doha in 2014, and in the 2000s Saudi Arabia withdrew its Ambassador from Qatar for five years in anger at the use of Al Jazeera to offer airtime to Saudi political dissidents. The longer the crisis continues the greater is the risk of irreversible long-term damage if Quartet officials push more overtly for regime change or if their Qatari counterparts seek to hit back with the same tactics. A zero-sum mentality is becoming deeply entrenched between the Quartet determination to never again allow Qatar to challenge the status quo in the Gulf and the Arab world and Qatar's conclusion that the overriding lesson of the crisis is the need to diversify still further its political, economic, and security relationships with regional and international partners.

The prospect of a prolonged internal crisis leaves the GCC greatly weakened. The organization is likely to survive, at least on paper, but to become far less relevant as policymaking is driven in individual capitals by a set of younger decision-makers who – unlike their elders they succeeded – appear to have far less affinity with the GCC than the generation that created it in 1981. Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah of Kuwait sounded a plaintive note as he lamented the damage done by the crisis to the GCC precisely

because he – along with Sultan Qaboos of Oman – represents the last of an older cohort of Gulf rulers who sought consensus over confrontation and witnessed first-hand the regional turmoil that propelled the GCC to come together in the first place.

In the immediate term, the GCC is likely to divide informally into an inner core of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, counterbalanced by an outer grouping of Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. The centrality of Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh and Mohammed bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi looks set to prioritize their highly personalized style of policymaking over the institutional considerations that have provided the technocratic underpinning of the GCC. The increasingly unpredictable – and fast-paced – nature of change in these key Gulf capitals is evident in the prosecution of the Yemen war and economic measures taken to counter falling oil prices and government revenues. And yet, decisions that increasingly are taken at the national level call into question the viability of ongoing projects that – at least until May 2017 – were at the forefront of further attempts to draw closer together at a time of economic uncertainty throughout the region.

Most obviously, the decision of three member-states to close their borders to the movement of Qatari people and goods is a dagger aimed at the very heart of the common market that came into operation in 2008. Intra-GCC trade, while still a low proportion of overall figures, increased significantly over the nine intervening years even as attempts to create a common energy market, electricity grid, and infrastructure network were only partially successful. If the electricity grid is left unaffected by the political dispute it could become a means of rebuilding mutual confidence by demonstrating the practical benefits of closer interconnectivity among GCC states. The same is true of the Dolphin arrangement whereby Qatari natural gas is piped to Abu Dhabi for use throughout the UAE and onward transmission to Oman. The fact that Qatari officials have not retaliated by shutting the pipeline offers a further element of hope that bilateral energy interests will provide at least a minimal incentive to improve relations at some future point.

Other initiatives, such as the planned GCC-wide railway project, will not necessarily be affected by the current dispute as they were already on ice, for economic reasons, before the Qatar crisis erupted. The railway project highlighted the difficulty of aligning country-level approaches as each state individually awarded contracts and based decisions on national rather than GCC-wide interests. The negative impact of the Qatar standoff on the GCC is far more likely to impede further economic integration just as the GCC was preparing to implement a shared Value Added Tax in 2018. On February 1, 2017, Bahrain became the sixth and final GCC state to sign a unified agreement to introduce VAT, but local implementing laws have still to be worked out, and the freezing of diplomatic relations with Qatar will hardly facilitate the finalizing of integrative mechanisms for sharing information and collecting data across the political divide.

Qatar already has broken ranks with the GCC consensus when the government in early-August announced plans to revise its residency law to grant permanent residency and extend some of the economic benefits hitherto reserved for citizens of GCC states to certain classes of non-citizens. In this, as with Qatar's other post-June 5 moves to diversify trade relations and shipping routes and restore full diplomatic relations with Iran, it is becoming evident that the standoff is pushing Qatar away from the GCC, rather than reining Doha in as per Quartet demands. The divisions within the GCC that have come so visibly to the surface will exacerbate and intensify the centrifugal forces moving power and influence inexorably back into national capitals and leaders.

External observers will fear that the GCC is broken both as a practical unit and an aspirational reality. Just as the intangible impact of the anti-Qatar rhetoric will reverberate across the social and political landscape for years to come, the tangible effects of the crisis will be felt in the marginalization of the GCC as a fully-functioning entity. With decision-making authority in the hands of a young new generation of rulers more willing to take risks and shed the consensual approach of their predecessors, it is hard to see the GCC papering over the cracks any time soon. For international stakeholders with political, economic, and security interests on both sides of the divide, there is mounting concern that the standoff has gone on for too long and represents an unnecessary distraction from more urgent considerations. These include defeating the residual threat from Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria, finding a diplomatic solution to the Syrian catastrophe, and preventing total state collapse in Yemen and Libya. Bahrain's decision to remove Qatari military personnel serving with the U.S.-led Bahrain-headquartered counter-ISIL coalition illustrates how the crisis has already impacted international responses to regional conflicts.

The prospect of a generational rift in a hitherto rock-solid web of political and security partnerships in the Gulf is deeply concerning to US and European policymakers. Moreover, the apparent inability of any of the parties to back down means they might continue to support informal policies that veer dangerously close to meddling in domestic political and ruling family affairs. Aside from creating bad blood that will take years to overcome, any such moves risk providing openings for new entrants to insert themselves into regional security dialogues in ways that may increase tensions further and reinforce the divergent trajectories that have led us to this point. US officials should consider carefully how best they can assist in using their leverage in Gulf capitals to dial down the rhetoric, prevent informal escalation, and contribute meaningfully to mediation efforts.

With the US government distracted by internal difficulties and struggling to coordinate policies between the White House and key government departments, a series of mixed messages have called into question the consistency of US leadership in the Gulf and magnified the need for the Trump administration to agree on one policy approach to better leverage US influence in the region and avoid unnecessary confusion in Gulf capitals. Attention should focus on ways to rebuild trust and mutual confidence both between governments and among the nationals of GCC states, and to examine how the rise of nationalist sentiment in individual Gulf States can coexist with the notion of khaleeji identity to ensure that the notion of belonging to a collective entity is seen to be worth retaining even as incipient Gulf nationalisms come to the forefront as never before.

## Biographies

### Global Cultural Knowledge Network, TRADOC G2



The Global Cultural Knowledge Network (GCKN) is a part of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G2. Our mission is to enable a holistic understanding of potential future operational environments (OE) through the collection of expertise and information and the development of products/services to enhance OE understanding at the operational level. GCKN combines the intellectual capacity of military, academic, and industry experts and brings it to the Army's next mission.

### Gerald Feierstein



Jerry Feierstein retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in May 2016 after a 41-year career. At the time of his retirement, Feierstein held the personal rank of Career Minister. Over the course of his career, he served in nine overseas postings, including three tours of duty in Pakistan, as well as tours in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Tunisia. In 2010, President Obama appointed Feierstein U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, where he served until 2013. From 2013 until his retirement, Feierstein was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs.

In addition to his career-long focus on the Near East and South Asia, Feierstein also played a prominent role in developing and implementing State Department policies and programs to counter violent extremism. As Deputy Coordinator and Principal Deputy Coordinator in the State Department's Counter-Terrorism bureau, Feierstein led the development of initiatives to build regional networks to confront extremist groups as well as to counter terrorist financing and promote counter-terrorism messaging. He continued to focus on defeating terrorist groups through his subsequent tours as Deputy Chief of Mission in Pakistan and as Ambassador to Yemen.

### Daniel Serwer



Daniel Serwer is a Professor of the Practice of Conflict Management, director of the Conflict Management Program and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Also a scholar at the Middle East Institute, Daniel Serwer is the author of *Righting the Balance* (Potomac Books, November 2013), editor (with David Smock) of *Facilitating Dialogue* (USIP, 2012) and supervised preparation of *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (USIP, 2009). *Righting the Balance* focuses on how to strengthen the civilian instruments of American foreign policy to match its strong military arm. *Facilitating Dialogue* analyzes specific cases and best practices in getting people to talk to each other in conflict zones. *Guiding Principles* is the leading compilation of best practices for civilians and military in post-war state-building.

As vice president of the Centers of Innovation at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Serwer led teams working on rule of law, peacebuilding, religion, economics, media, technology, security sector governance and gender. He was also vice president for peace and stability operations at USIP, overseeing its peacebuilding work in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq and Sudan and serving as executive director of the Hamilton/Baker Iraq Study Group. As a minister-counselor at the U.S. Department of State, Serwer directed the European office of intelligence and research and served as U.S. special envoy and coordinator for the Bosnian Federation, mediating between Croats and Muslims and negotiating the first agreement reached at the Dayton Peace Talks; from 1990 to 1993, he was deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, leading a major diplomatic mission through the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War. Serwer is a graduate of Haverford College and earned Masters degrees at the University of Chicago and Princeton, where he also did his PhD in history.

## Mubin Shaikh



Born and raised in Canada, **Mubin Shaikh** grew up with two conflicting and competing cultures. At the age of 19, he went to India and Pakistan where he had a chance encounter with the Taliban before their takeover of Afghanistan in 1995. Shaikh became fully radicalized as a supporter of the global Jihadist culture, recruiting others but the 9/11 attacks forced to him reconsider his views. He spent 2 years in Syria, continuing his study of Arabic and Islamic Studies and went through a period of full deradicalization.

Returning to Canada in 2004, he was recruited by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and worked several CLASSIFIED infiltration operations on the internet, in chat-protected forums and on the ground with human networks. In late 2005, one of those intelligence files moved to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) for investigation. The "Toronto 18" terrorism case resulted in the conviction of 11 aspiring violent extremists after testifying over 4 years, in 5 legal hearings at the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

Shaikh has since obtained a Master of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (MPICT) and is considered an SME (Subject Matter Expert) in national security and counterterrorism, and radicalization & deradicalization to the United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, NATO, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), CENTCOM, various special operations forces, the FBI and others. He has appeared on multiple U.S., British and Canadian media outlets as a commentator and is extensively involved with the ISIS social media and Foreign Fighter (including Returnees and rehabilitation) file. Shaikh is also co-author of the acclaimed book, *Undercover Jihadi*.

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## Martin Styszynski



Marcin Styszynski (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. He also served as the cultural and scientific attaché in the Embassy of Poland in Egypt (2009-2012) and the second secretary in the Embassy of Poland in Algeria (2012-2014). In 2016 he started new duties of Consul in the Embassy of Poland in Riyadh.

## Kristian Coates Ulrichsen



Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Ph.D., is a Fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy and the author of four books on the Gulf, including *Insecure Gulf: the End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (2011), *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (2014), *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (2015), and *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking* (2016).

## Weston Aviles



Weston Aviles is an analyst at NSI, Inc. He studied criminology and political science at Arizona State University (BS) with minors in Middle Eastern history and economics, and certificates in political thought and leadership, international studies and religion and conflict. Weston then studied Government at the InterDisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel graduate school with a focus in counter-terrorism and security studies (MA). His graduate studies focused on Arab Spring dynamics, international security in the MENA region and radical Islam. Weston is an alumni of the University of Virginia's Semester at Sea program and has participated in several academic programs in Israel to study terrorism and counter-terrorism. Weston is now an analyst for NSI and continues a research focus on Middle Eastern politics and conflict studies.