

CIRS AND THE NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (NESA) HOST STRATEGIC FORUM ON GULF SECURITY



On September 25, 2016, in collaboration with the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA) at the National Defense University, CIRS hosted a one-day workshop under the title “Strategic Forum on Gulf Security.” Distinguished scholars, experts, and policy-makers were convened to discuss current threats and concerns, and potential opportunities in some Gulf countries, including: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Iran. The participants also discussed the United States’ positions on a number of these security concerns and opportunities.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states have been keen to protect their monarchies, and maintain the status quo in the Middle East by following more assertive foreign policies, and utilizing their financial capabilities to influence the political dynamics in the region. Five main perceived security concerns have

been driving the active role of GCC states in the Middle East: the instability in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; the uncertainty about US priorities in the region; the rise of non-state actors such as the Islamic State; the profound fluctuations in the oil market; and domestic social and economic challenges.

Regardless of internal disagreements, security remains a top priority for GCC leaders, as is regional and domestic stability. Despite significant steps toward integration since its formation some thirty-five years ago, the GCC is still far from providing a model of security integration. GCC member states have different perceptions of their security threats, especially when it comes to Iran. Some perceive of Iran as having hegemonic aspirations in the region, and, thus, pursue policies designed to undermine Iranian influence, especially in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Many GCC states are also developing advanced security systems in order to minimize possible cyber attacks on their oil facilities and other infrastructures. Another priority of the GCC states has been maintaining rapid economic growth, which is central to regime legitimacy, and, by implication, security. Although largely immune from it, the GCC states are also concerned about the threat of domestic terrorism. These different perceptions among GCC states have undermined attempts at security integration, and especially collective efforts to develop a common missile security system directed at threats from Iran.

Considering these perceived threats, the participants argued that each of the GCC states continues to think in national rather than collective terms. They also invest heavily in their own security through arms purchases and weapons acquisition. There has been an increasing perception that the US is an unreliable ally, and, as a result, there is greater need for self-reliance. Focusing on the UAE, the country’s security mood could be described as one of confidence as well as concern. The UAE is living through one of its most confident eras. At the same time, the country remains very concerned about the region and the pervasiveness of tension, extremism, violence, and sectarianism, which may spill over into its



own territories. There are five main perceived security threats facing the UAE. The first threat is Iran, as both an instant and a continuous threat. With the election of the Rouhani administration, Iran is perceived as more problematic, threatening, and destabilizing than ever before. This perception of Iran is shared by some of the other GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia. The threat from Iran has also escalated from being merely security oriented to an ideological threat, with Wahhabism versus Khomeinism. The second threat is the prolonged war in Yemen, which directly relates to a third threat, namely, “the weak links between GCC member states.” Bahrain, Kuwait, and post-Qaboos Oman, and possibly even Saudi Arabia, are all weak links that challenge a strong and unified GCC. The last threat is the “post-US Gulf.” President Obama’s foreign policy has encouraged GCC states to seek a path of less dependence on the US, and they compensate for this by establishing relations and alliances with other global and regional powers.

The key challenge facing the UAE’s leadership is how to navigate between concerns and opportunities. The UAE has invested in the most advanced security systems in order to shield itself from as many security challenges as possible, and has become more assertive and preemptive in confronting security threats. It has also been playing an active role at the regional level. On the international level, the UAE, through the GCC, has been establishing stronger ties with the European Union, and is in talks to sign bilateral trade agreements with Britain. This regional and international activism is designed to prepare the country for the post-US Gulf.

Insofar as Qatar is concerned, there are three levels of analysis from which to examine Qatari leadership’s behavior: domestic politics, foreign policy, and security politics. In terms of domestic politics, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa tried to transform Qatar into the Singapore of the Gulf. Articulating such a vision and, at the same time, diving away from the shadows of Saudi Arabia, was facilitated by three main factors: social cohesion in Qatari society, absence of sectarian divides, and absence of a parliament that resists the emir’s agendas. For Qatar, threat perceptions in the 1990s revolved around possible machinations by Saudi Arabia to reinstall power to the deposed emir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad. As the country became more stable under Sheikh Hamad’s rule, Qatar’s efforts at protecting its security turned into power projection. This projection of power often occurred through the country’s use of hedging as a foreign policy option. Accordingly, Qatar placed its security bet with the US, but also maintained ostensibly warm relations with states and non-state actors such as Iran, Hamas, and the Taliban. Qatar also sought to position itself as an honest broker for peace and negotiations. During and after the Arab uprisings, Qatar saw instability in the region as an opportunity rather than a threat, and capitalized on what it perceived as emerging opportunities.

However, Qatar’s overambitious assertions in regional foreign policy, particularly in Egypt and Libya, had some undesired consequences. A strong reaction from Saudi Arabia and other GCC actors, culminating in the withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini ambassadors from Doha, led to a change in a chastened Qatari foreign policy direction. Currently in Syria, for example, Qatar is no longer competing with Saudi Arabia for influence. Qatar’s relationship with the US has traditionally been close at multiple levels, and there are visible signs of this in terms

of diplomacy, economy, culture, and security. Due to the robustness of its cooperation with the US, Qatar appears to be less concerned than other GCC states about US foreign policy in the region. Qatar continues to develop its security partnerships with other Western states, as the recent arms deal with France demonstrates, and is also developing a strategic relationship with Turkey.

Iran’s perception of its security interests and threats have been going through a transitional phase following the signing of the nuclear deal. The Iranian leadership had assumed that the deal would help the country re-prioritize its security threats, and open up new opportunities for international engagement, but, to date, little has changed. While the Iranians feel that they have fulfilled their side of the bargain, US and European leaders remain skeptical. As a result, the US has been discouraging Western companies and international banks from working with Iran. Currently, Iranian foreign policy aims are to enhance the country’s relations with the EU, while also cooperating closely with Russia and China. When it comes to Iran’s foreign policy towards the Arab world, although there are tensions with a number of its traditional regional rivals, the country has been keen to develop relations with a number of Arab states and non-state actors in the region.

US foreign policy towards the Gulf is in a period of transition, with the view that the US is shifting its priorities to the eastern shore of the Gulf, namely Iran. The Obama administration is considered to be unwilling to challenge Iran and uphold the interests of the Arab states of the Gulf. This uncertainty around US foreign policy towards the Gulf region is driving GCC states to embark on re-engineering their countries’ agendas in preparation for the transition to the post-US Gulf. At the end of the forum, Mehran Kamrava, Director of CIRS, and Richard L. Russell Professor of National Security Affairs at NESa gave their concluding remarks. They stressed on this forum’s contribution to a greater understanding of the current realities and high stakes of the security environment in the Gulf region. ■



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