THE CHANGING SECURITY DYNAMICS OF THE PERSIAN GULF

Summary Report
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© Cover Photo: Bahraini women participating in a demonstration during the Arab uprisings of 2015 (Hussain Ali/Pacific Press/LightRocket via GettyImages). Cover Design: Rob Pinney.
The prevailing security architecture that has emerged in the Gulf since the 1980s inheres two fundamental flaws. First, with its overwhelming reliance on the objectives and components of US power, it is based on the premise of excluding, containing, and marginalizing two of the region’s largest and most important states, namely Iran and Iraq. Doing so has necessitated the commitment of extensive, and therefore inherently risky, American military forces to the region. The US may have indeed neutralized one of the perceived threats, Iraq, but only after a costly invasion and occupation, a repetition of which in relation to Iran seems highly unlikely. Instead, the US and its regional allies have sought to contain and marginalize Iran through extensive military presence and deterrence in the Gulf. However, despite extensive military commitment, coupled with crippling sanctions imposed on Iran because of its nuclear program, efforts at establishing an American-led security architecture in the Gulf have failed to make the region secure.

A second flaw inherent in the prevailing Gulf security architecture has been its neglect of some of the more pervasive security threats the region faces and its exaggeration of others for seemingly political and ideological reasons. For much of the GCC states, before the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, regional threats emanated from Iran and Iraq. The convergence of the priorities of local political elites with US policy objectives has resulted in a neglect of those security threats that are a products of the political economies of the GCC states. Instead, there have been exaggerated assumptions about Iran’s hegemonic ambitions and its insidious intentions of using local Shi’a populations as its fifth column. In simple terms, current security arrangements in the Gulf only partially address security threats, namely perceived threats emanating from Iran and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states, and ignore more deep-seated, structural challenges inherent in regional political economies.

Academic interest in Gulf security has continued to focus on traditional notions of zero-sum security threats emanating from Iran or Iraq, or the role of the United States. There has been limited exploration of the deeper, structural issues that threaten the region. In line with this, in the 2014-2015 academic year, CIRS launched a research initiative on “The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf.” The purpose of this project is to scrutinize the ways in which domestic security threats in the region are evolving, and how newer challenges related to human security are being reinforced by—and in some ways actually replacing—military threats emanating from regional and outside actors. This project brings together a number of distinguished scholars to examine a variety of relevant topics, which resulted in original research chapters published in an edited volume titled, *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf* (Oxford University Press/Hurst, 2017), edited by Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. This Summary Report contains synopses of those chapters.
# The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf

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1. **Introduction**  
Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

The political and economic upheaval triggered by the “Arab Spring” uprisings of 2011 has underscored the vulnerability of states across the Middle East and North Africa to the intersection of domestic pressures and external shocks. The initial phase of the uprisings has given way to a series of messy and uncertain transitions that has ignited violence both within and across states and left societies deeply fractured. Although the bulk of the protests occurred outside the Persian Gulf, with the notable exception of Bahrain and the partial exception of Kuwait, Persian Gulf states were at the forefront of the political, economic, and security response across the region. The greater role of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, in particular, is consistent with broader changes to the architecture of world politics in which contemporary power and influence are increasingly diffused and distributed among a far wider variety of often-competing state and non-state actors. And yet, the dramatic decline in world oil prices since June 2014 has heightened fiscal stresses in all Persian Gulf economies and called into question the redistributive political economies that have, in part, underpinned sociopolitical stability over the past four decades. Moreover, the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen that started in March 2015 demonstrated nothing less than the militarisation of GCC defence policy and a direct escalation of the regional struggle with Iran, hitherto carried out largely through proxy actors in local battlegrounds.

The contradictory trends of the volatile “post-Arab Spring” landscape form both the backdrop to and the focus of this volume on the changing security dynamics of the Persian Gulf, defined as the six GCC states plus Iraq and Iran. The Persian Gulf has long been a zone of instability as the region experienced three major interstate conflicts between 1980 and 2003 and the subsequent civil conflict in Iraq, as well as two prolonged diplomatic crises between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2014 and 2017. While the legacies of the Iran–Iraq War (September 1980–August 1988) and the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (August 1990–February 1991) were relatively contained, the same is not true of the US-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq (March 2003 onward). The chaotic aftermath of the eight-year occupation of Iraq had a lasting impact on regional security structures as it altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, empowered non-state actors in Iraq, and deepened internal fissures along ethnic and sectarian fault-lines across the wider region. One of the greatest changes in Persian Gulf security dynamics since 2003 has been the shift from interstate war towards violent conflict within states driven primarily by non-state groups that nevertheless operate in a rigorously transnational sphere.

Further from the Persian Gulf, the radicalisation of sizeable elements of the Arab Spring protest movements added a further layer of instability and insecurity, most notably in the spiralling civil wars in Libya and Syria after 2011. Both conflicts drew in a multitude of regional actors, state and non-state alike, and evolved into complex proxy wars between “secular” and Islamist factions in Libya and among a plethora of Gulf Arab and Iranian-backed groups in Syria. The conflicts in Syria and Libya ramified across large swathes of the Middle East and North Africa, greatly increased sectarian violence in post-occupation Iraq,
and contributed to a wider geopolitical picture of deep division and protracted levels of intercommunal violence. The United States and the European Union arguably intervened too hastily in Libya and too slowly in Syria as the shadow of Iraq loomed large over policymakers.

The speed and scale of developments across the Arab world since 2011 mean there is an urgent need for a comprehensive, critical, and fresh perspective on the evolution of regional security dynamics in the Persian Gulf. Analysing the region as a whole, rather than through a GCC-centric or Iranian-focused approach, draws out the narratives and identities that play off each other and feed into the construction of security agendas at both the national and regional levels. Coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, the ten contributors to this volume adopt a comprehensive and holistic approach to key dimensions of regional security as well as to the issues that feed into security policymaking at its various levels. The chapters combine thematic and regional-level analyses of critical issues with case studies that chart the evolution of national-level trends and include the security implications of such issues as political succession and the evolution of state–business relations. Interwoven throughout are the internal and external aspects of security that are heavily enmeshed not only within the “new” non-state actors and transnational threats but also among the technologically supercharged “public sphere.”

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen is Fellow for the Middle East at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy and Associate Fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House). Coates Ulrichsen’s research focuses on the international relations and international political economy of the Persian Gulf as well as the reformulation of regional security structures. Coates Ulrichsen is the author of six books, including Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era (2011), Qatar and the Arab Spring (2014), and The First World War in the Middle East (2014), all published by Hurst.
2. **Links Between Domestic and Regional Security**  
   Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

Internal and external dimensions of security have become inextricably linked to debates as well as policy responses to domestic and regional security threats and challenges in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and in Iraq and Iran, with the growth of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) only the latest, if by some distance the most extreme, manifestation of the trend. Regional and global developments in the 1990s and 2000s eroded the thin marker between the national and international spheres of policy in a region already heavily penetrated by supra- and sub-state ideational and material processes. The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 and regional responses to the broader political upheaval across the Middle East and North Africa gave urgency to the porous relationship between internal and external security. Yet, as this chapter will illustrate, the challenge facing officials and regimes in the Gulf is that there appear to be no easy answers to the set of profound political, economic, and security questions that have been triggered by the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. Instead, the rapid growth of ISIS has rekindled memories of past contestations of regime authority by radical Islamist groups, particularly in Saudi Arabia, yet with regional and even global amplifications of the new and online media and social networking.

There are four parts to this chapter. The opening section focuses on the deeper transitions under way in regional and global security as wars between states gradually gave way to conflicts within societies as primary causes of instability, and the very concept of “security” itself was broadened and deepened. It also charts the growth of volatile new non-state, transnational threats such as al-Qaeda in the 1990s and, a decade later, its regional offshoot, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Their rise took place against the backdrop of the fallout from the 2003 US-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. The second section describes the “geopolitical straitjacket” that arose when Gulf policies—to counter the perceived rise of Iranian and Shiite influence in the region—became a liability following the rapid growth of ISIS in 2014. The third section examines how the rise of ISIS presents a dangerous new security threat to the GCC states by transcending national boundaries and interlinking the domestic and regional dimensions in ways that defy easy responses. The chapter ends with a fourth section that analyses the international dimension to regional security in the light of the GCC campaign in Yemen, which started in March 2015.

The challenge for policymakers in the Gulf states is that they find themselves caught between two paradoxical trajectories: more able to project their influence and shape changing global institutions and structures, while susceptible to domestic contestation arising from the interlinking of local discontent with regional and international pressures. The global emergence of the Gulf states and the new challenges posed by the Arab Spring therefore constitute two diverging trends for the contemporary Gulf. On the one hand there are the broader shifts in geo-economic power and the rebalancing of the global order towards multiple centres of political and economic influence, while on the other there is the new sense of vulnerability that stability may be more elusive than previously imagined. This has on occasion caused great mistrust and suspicion in the highly charged “post-Arab Spring” atmosphere as the GCC states became more assertive in the international arena and gaps opened up between established and emergent regional players. Syria offers a salutary example of the difficulties that arise when the international community is divided and when regional and international actors pursue unilateral policies that follow competing or even contradictory lines.
This chapter deals with the relations between countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the three North African countries that saw mass uprisings (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya) since 2011. Morocco and Algeria, which survived the Arab uprisings with their political systems intact, will not be discussed in this chapter because the persistence of the old regimes either ensured unanimous Gulf support (Morocco) or limited opportunities for Gulf involvement (Algeria). Indeed, the chapter will look at the ways in which various Gulf states, above all Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait, have tried to influence the political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. It argues that the period since 2011 has witnessed a profound shift in the foreign policies of the GCC states from petrodollar diplomacy to direct involvement in politics and even military intervention.

This topic has received some attention in the media and in country-specific case studies of the Arab uprisings. A number of works have looked at the changing GCC foreign policies since 2011, but, with a few exceptions, the recent role of the GCC countries in North Africa has not been studied in depth. By involving themselves so forcefully in the internal affairs of North African states, GCC actors not only have deployed an unprecedented measure of “hard” power alongside more usual “softer” forms of influence, but also have inserted themselves in the turbulent maelstrom of the post-Arab Spring transition process. In addition to close association with the volatility of political processes they cannot fully control, the ongoing financial commitment to securing the range of GCC states’ interests in North Africa constitutes a new form of potential insecurity in an age of comparative austerity, when ruling elites in the Gulf are trying to cut back on the welfare state and introduce new forms of revenue-raising from their population, including citizens.

For countries that have for centuries relied on alliances with great powers, mostly the United Kingdom and the United States, for their external and at times internal security, this new interventionist foreign policy of the GCC is a striking shift. And while in the eyes of Gulf decision-makers their interventions contribute to state security, it is not certain that this will be the long-term outcome of these interventions, especially given the highly volatile and polarised political, security, and economic situation in North Africa. In essence, this new politics of interventionism has contributed to the regional security dilemma, whereby any state’s loss of influence in a corner of the Arab world leads to an increase in influence for rival forces. Of course, this has in some ways also previously been the case, but what is new is that this regional security dilemma is now fought out between different Gulf states with a large amount of resources (mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, as well as Iran). This has changed the nature of Arab politics and the international relations of the region.

Over decades, a system of Arab politics had emerged that was shaped by negotiations, interactions, and debates about Arabism between Arab political leaders. This system became increasingly replaced by an Arab regional system in which most Arab states (except Syria, Iraq, and Algeria) have come under the strong influence of oil-rich countries of the Gulf. The financial survival of many Arab states is to varying degrees dependent on Gulf aid. Unlike in previous decades, however, Gulf interests in Arab politics are now not just pursued with money and diplomacy. Instead, the region has witnessed material military support and even the
direct involvement of Gulf militaries, so far mainly Special Forces and air power, in North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen. In addition, the struggle over influence in the Arab world is not just fought against non-Arab regional countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel, but also increasingly between GCC countries (as illustrated by the rift between Qatar and other GCC member states since 2014).

The Gulf states have intervened across the region since 2011 in varying yet unprecedented ways. In North Africa, this intervention took different forms from the direct Gulf interventions in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, while the sectarian and geopolitical rivalry with Iran was less prominent, although not absent. In the Maghreb, ideological divisions and rivalries between Sunni factions were more important than the Sunni–Shi'a split. The key aims of the Gulf States (minus Qatar) were to establish GCC hegemony over the Arab world, protect old pro-GCC regimes (while ousting others, such as Muammar Gaddafi’s), and prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from maintaining power and successfully establishing an alternative Sunni Islamic political order. Given the importance of Egypt in Arab and Islamic history, the status of being the most important international allies of Egypt is seen as a source of pride and strength for the Gulf rulers, and prevents Egypt from becoming too independent and possibly a rival to the GCC.

In short, the Gulf states, like European and American imperial forces before them, can rent or occupy the casbah, but they will never own it. Nevertheless, by getting involved in the regional security dynamics of North Africa at a time of economic austerity programmes within the Gulf itself, policymakers now are exposed to new sources of external volatility and potential insecurity that they cannot easily hope to control, still less manage.

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This chapter explores the rapid changes in the global energy landscape over the past decade and assesses their implications for the security and international relations of the states of the Persian Gulf. Ever since the 1973 Arab oil embargo, which marked a turning point in global energy markets, the non-interruption of supplies and stable prices have been major concerns and goals of the United States and other major energy consumers. Over the ensuing four decades, rising consumption and declining production have underscored the energy vulnerability of Washington and other major consumers. This has changed dramatically since the late 2000s with profound implications for notions of energy security more broadly and for regional and domestic security considerations with the Persian Gulf itself. The realignment of the global energy landscape adds a critical layer of external context to the difficult processes of transition within Persian Gulf economies as officials and publics respond to the prolonged fall in oil prices since mid-2014.

Energy is not just an economic commodity. It is a strategic one, with significant security implications. The US military is the world’s largest energy consumer; without adequate and stable supplies the nation could not carry out its military operations and missions. Thus, the security of oil supplies from the Persian Gulf has been a major driver of American defence and foreign policies for the last several decades. The Carter Doctrine in 1980 stated clearly that the United States would use military force, if necessary, to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf. Since the 1970s, US strategic relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have steadily grown, and Washington has been the region’s major security guarantor. To be sure, oil has not been the sole goal of American policy in the Persian Gulf region. One can argue that other objectives, such as promoting democracy, the security of Israel, counter-terrorism, and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, also have been pursued.

The United States has never accepted this energy vulnerability and deep dependence on foreign supplies, particularly from the Middle East. Since the Nixon administration, all American presidents have sought to reduce the nation’s dependence on imported oil and achieve a state of “energy independence.” President George W. Bush bluntly warned that the nation was “addicted to oil.” In pursuing these goals, the United States has implemented a multidimensional strategy, mainly diversifying both the energy mix and energy sources. In other words, efforts have been made to increase domestic production; reduce the share of oil in the energy mix and increase those of natural gas, nuclear, and renewable resources; import less oil from the Middle East; and improve energy efficiency.

These investments have paid off. Since the early 2000s, US energy consumption has declined despite a growing economy and population. Equally significant, oil and natural gas production has been on the rise, largely because of technological innovations known as hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and horizontal drilling. The combination of reducing consumption and rising production has significantly improved the United States’ energy outlook. These emerging trends are likely to persist for a long time. Efficiency is projected to improve further, and oil and gas production is projected to increase. This improved energy outlook has started paying dividends. Instead of importing gas and oil, the United States is itself becoming
a net exporter. The millions of dollars the nation would have spent on imports will now be spent or invested domestically. This is helping to lower the trade deficit, restrain the inflation rate, and create jobs. At the same time, Washington has earned more leverage in pursuing its foreign policy. The United States is increasingly becoming less dependent on imported oil supplies and less vulnerable to the fluctuation in oil prices. This gives the nation more freedom in pursuing its national interests.

Probably it is too early to fully comprehend the strategic implications of the emerging energy landscape. Still, the fundamental changes in the US outlook raise several important questions. Will the United States reduce its military and strategic engagement in the Middle East? Will Asian powers and the European Union member states, who are becoming more dependent on Middle Eastern oil supplies, shoulder more security responsibilities? And how might oil and gas producers in the Middle East respond to these new dynamics?

This chapter seeks to provide preliminary answers to these questions. I argue that the improved US energy outlook has substantially strengthened the nation’s economy and foreign policy leverage. These less-restrained American foreign and defence policies do not, however, mean less engagement in the Middle East. On the other hand, Middle Eastern oil and gas producers are not net losers. Facing less favourable global markets, they have pursued different economic and strategic options to counter the emerging dynamics. In order to fully appreciate the shale revolution, I discuss briefly the main trends that characterise the global energy market. This will be followed by an analysis of the shale revolution and its security and strategic implications. I discuss the declining US dependence on imported oil from the Persian Gulf and China’s move in the opposite direction. The following section will focus on the energy and strategic relations between the GCC states and the other major energy consumer—the European Union (EU). The final section will address how oil and gas producers are reacting to this evolving environment. The analysis is based on the assumption that the GCC states rely heavily on foreign powers to contain threats to their national security. In pursuing such strategies, the GCC states utilise energy interdependence to cement security and strategic relations with these foreign powers.

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5. **Towards the End of the Oligarchic Pact? Business and Politics in Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and Oman**

Marc Valeri

The evolving nature of the “social contract” in GCC states, made more urgent by the decline in oil prices and government revenues since 2014, places new pressure on key political economic relationships that have for decades helped to underpin regime stability and security. The changing nexus of state–business relations in the Gulf has direct implications for political stability and ruling successions in GCC states, particularly those under review in this chapter.

In the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the business communities have an earlier history of political influence, alongside their related economic role. Over the last decade, the nature and evolution of state–business relations in the Gulf monarchies have received greater attention, especially in the context of the Arab Spring. While most of these studies have concentrated on the mutually beneficial relationship that binds together the political and business elites and on the crucial role played by the latter in supporting the established sociopolitical order and shaping political legitimacy, this chapter chooses to focus instead on the economic role and influence of the ruling families. It argues that, in all six GCC states, an increasing number of ruling family members have entered the business and private sectors over recent decades. This definitely marks a new phase in the contemporary history of state–business relations in the Gulf monarchies.

While the pre-oil period was characterised by the existence of an oligarchic pact between rulers and merchants, in which the latter’s economic power allowed them to exert extended political influence, the surge in oil revenues (which took place gradually across the Arabian Peninsula between the 1930s, in Bahrain and Kuwait, and the 1970s, in Oman) disrupted this balance. Even if the ruling elite–business elite relationship has tolerated significant variations from one GCC country to another, a common tendency was that the rulers’ material affluence forced the merchants to retreat from the political sphere. In return, the economic pre-eminence of the business actors was recognized and protected, and they were guaranteed a substantial part of the rentier state’s subsidies.

The argument developed in this chapter is that business–ruling family relations in the Gulf monarchies have entered a third phase, in which the involvement of members of ruling families has increased dramatically, to such an extent that this has been to the detriment of the historical business elites. The ruling families’ encroachment on a field that has remained for most of the twentieth century a preserve of the merchant class cannot but impinge upon the traditional strategic alliance between the two elites. Given the role of this relationship in perpetuating the post-oil sociopolitical status quo, the unprecedented intrusion of ruling family members in the private sector is likely to have major implications for the whole rentier social contract in these states and, consequently, for their domestic stability. While Qatar’s ruling family has always played a greater role in commerce and members of Kuwaiti and Saudi ruling families have become much more prominent in business too, this chapter will concentrate on Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and Oman. Beyond obvious space constraints, which prevent a full comparative study here of the six GCC countries, the choice to compare Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and Oman is supported by the observation of the differences
between the historical patterns of state–business relations in these three countries. The situation in Bahrain, where the royal family and the economic elite are historically distinct and where both have impinged on the other’s preserve, contrasts with that of Abu Dhabi, where business and political elites have formed a cohesive and intermingled oligarchy, and of Oman, where the ruling family is weak and politically dependent on a bourgeoisie that has played a key role in politics. Yet, despite these historical differences, a common pattern can be observed: the long-term, sustained increase of the ruling families’ involvement in local economy as well as the concomitant decline of the political and economic influence of the historical business actors. The first GCC country where this development occurred was probably Bahrain, as early as the 1970s, while it has manifested itself in Abu Dhabi and Oman much more recently.

After a first section providing a comparative overview of the main patterns governing state–business relations in the Persian Gulf monarchies, before and after oil, with a particular emphasis on Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and Oman, this chapter will document the increasing involvement of members of the Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and Oman ruling families in the business sector, and the concomitant growing dependence of the merchant families on the rulers. The popular protests that took place in the GCC in 2011 and 2012 revealed the business sector’s resistance to change in, for example, the way national bourgeoisies remain unfailing allies of the ruling families. Even more, the protests highlighted the business sector’s increasingly limited latitude of action in the political field. This chapter then argues that the nature and extent of this major shift in the quality of business politics in the GCC will have substantial implications for the wider questions of the social contract established during the rentier period in the twentieth century.

Marc Valeri is Associate Professor in Political Economy of the Middle East and Director of the Centre for Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter. He is the author of Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State (Hurst, 2009) and co-editor of Business Politics in the Middle East (Hurst, 2013).
India has a long-standing, rich, and intimate relationship with the Persian Gulf region that extends from antiquity to the present day. India’s emergence as a “middle power” is underpinned by its energy security reliance upon the Persian Gulf and the further expansion of energy and trading relationships with the region. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states collectively constitute India’s most important trading partner, more so than the European Union (EU). India currently imports 80 percent of its oil needs from the Gulf, a figure that is expected to rise to 90 percent over the next decade. Moreover, over six million Indian nationals work in the Gulf region, almost three million in Saudi Arabia alone. This results in approximately US$32 billion in annual remittances, almost half of India’s total remittances, and roughly equivalent to the overall annual foreign direct investment (FDI) in the country.

With a rapidly ascendant economy, currently the second-fastest growing in the world and already recognised as one of the ten largest globally, and moreover with its overwhelming dependence on oil imports from the Gulf, as the world’s fourth-largest consumer of energy, India’s relationship with the Gulf is only going to deepen further. Driven by the economics of energy, trade, and expatriate labour, India’s relationship with the Gulf is undergoing a steady augmentation. As India’s position in the Gulf grows, so will its general presence and its role in regional politics, as reflected by the visits paid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE in August 2015 and Saudi Arabia in April 2016.

This chapter explores India’s engagement with the Persian Gulf region. The focus is limited here in the main to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, although reference is made to Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. Firstly, the chapter places India’s role in the international system in a theoretical context, utilizing middle power theory to explain India’s foreign policy outlook. Secondly, it examines India’s relationship with the Gulf states in terms of the dominant economic, socio-cultural, and military drivers. Finally, it explores the contemporary status of the Indian–Gulf relationship, assessing the extent to which India can be described as a rising power in the region.

The challenge for India lies in defining a more proactive, rather than strictly reactive, role in the Gulf. Beyond this, the challenge lies in assuming a more assertive presence, as compared with the subsidiary role it has largely practiced, deferring to the United States on important regional security matters, despite clearly divergent interests in some instances. One example of this is Iran, with whom India has a long-standing bilateral relationship. There are many reasons to favour India as a rising power in a region long dominated by external actors, not least because it may lead to a more positive conception of regional security. Currently, the practice of regional politics is based very much on realist principles of force. In no small part, this has been perpetuated by the United States, which, as the regional security guarantor, has repeatedly used force to preserve stability and its interests in the region, for example in the Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003.
Could India’s traditional stance of non-alignment and, more importantly, its contemporary emphasis on multilateralism, diplomacy, and negotiation contribute to a redefinition of the security architecture in the Gulf? A more multilateral approach to regional security could plausibly benefit the myriad conflicts and crises ongoing throughout the region. This is underscored by India’s long-standing cultural links with the Gulf, spanning thousands of years, its legacy of colonial rule, and subsequently ardently anti-imperialist stance, which could potentially render India’s engagement with the Gulf a new chapter in the region’s history. Yet the question remains whether the Gulf states themselves truly perceive India as a viable international actor in the Gulf, one capable of counterbalancing the United States, Russia, and China, not to mention regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Nevertheless, India is clearly a rising power in the Gulf. Ultimately, the question remains whether Indian policymakers will acknowledge this and adopt a commensurate role in regional affairs.

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The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) prompted a year of soulsearching and renewed collective action for the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, faced with a profound new challenge to regional security on their very doorstep. When the militant group made its extraordinary advances in Iraq in June 2014, the GCC was mired in internal conflict among states with different ideological responses to the Arab Spring. But the appearance of a sudden threat to collective security interests led the GCC to pull together, despite its disagreements, and to pursue its plans for a shared defence architecture with renewed vigour. An early commitment to the international anti-ISIS coalition, however, gave way to scepticism as it became increasingly clear that the United States was pursuing a limited, Iraq-first agenda that did not have the capacity to tackle the Syrian civil war. This scepticism has been compounded by the increasingly visible role that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have played on the ground in Iraq, by the agreement reached in July 2015 at the climax of the Iranian nuclear negotiations, and by the perceived role that Iran has played in supporting the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. As a result, the threat posed by ISIS has quickly been eclipsed by the threat that many GCC states feel is presented by growing Iranian dominance in the region. Renewed GCC security cooperation is, therefore, becoming increasingly centred on countering Iranian influence, rather than on supporting the fight against ISIS.

The Gulf states must now confront an environment that they believe to be uniquely threatening, with the region’s traditional security guarantor—the United States—playing a diminished leadership role during the Obama administration. Following the rise of ISIS, the GCC states patched up some of their political differences and came together to refocus on the substantial threats facing their collective security, although the areas of policy disagreement with Qatar remained unresolved and triggered renewed regional instability in the diplomatic standoff that began in June 2017. It is in this context that Saudi Arabia has been able to pull together an astounding military coalition to attack the Houthi rebels, who had been sweeping across Yemen with suspected Iranian support. Although the Houthi rebellion in Yemen is a complex, domestically driven political crisis that poses little threat to most of the GCC countries involved in the military strikes, the prospect of further Iranian expansion has enabled Saudi Arabia to rally together a substantial, Arab-led military coalition to prevent the Houthis from taking over Yemen. In a joint statement, all the GCC states except Oman warned that the Houthi advances in Yemen were a “major threat” to the region, and accused the Houthis of being backed by regional powers, in a naked reference to Iran. Operation Decisive Storm, as the assault was labelled, pounded Yemen with air strikes for almost a month before Saudi Arabia announced a new phase, entitled Operation Restoring Hope, in which it was intended that air strikes would be limited to defensive activity and there would be a refocus on political negotiations, although the military phase of the operations continued and an attempted ceasefire in December 2015 failed to halt the fighting. The extraordinary scope of the Saudi-led coalition is potential evidence of a new era in GCC politics, in which the Gulf feels that it has both the capacity and the responsibility to take a leading role in securing the region from growing Iranian power. This was also reflected in renewed efforts by Saudi Arabia—prior to the June
2017 Gulf crisis and ousting of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef Al Saud—to resolve its differences with Qatar and Turkey with regard to the backing of Syrian rebels. Reports indicate that Qatar is brokering talks between Turkey and Saudi Arabia about the possibility of substantially increasing support for the Syrian opposition and unifying many of the rebel groups, as Russia and Iran stepped up their support for the Assad regime during the summer and autumn of 2015.

In 2015-16, the GCC showed once again that when its core interests were under threat it could pull together, resolve, or at least suppress its differences, and act in defence of its collective security. The renewal of the diplomatic crisis with Qatar in June 2017, just as ISIS was defeated in Mosul and surrounded in Raqqa, illustrated the difficulty of maintaining policy cohesion when the common threat to security was loosened. Despite the promising steps towards reconciliation with the Iraqi government, and a brief interlude in which the GCC and Iran seemed on the same side in Iraq, the continued advance of Iranian power across the region has once again emerged as the GCC’s dominant security threat. In a region that has been all but abandoned by the Obama administration, the GCC has increasingly come to believe that if it is to avoid the region being pulled firmly into an Iranian orbit, it will have to mount its own defence. This has presented the incoming Trump administration with an immediate foreign policy challenge as officials attempt to rebuild damaged relationships with their Persian Gulf counterparts and ensure, at the very least, an alignment of interests with the perceptions and priorities of threats to regional security.

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As the two most salient regional powers in the Persian Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia have developed differing goals in their foreign policy objectives, which have presented both with serious challenges to their national security interests. The security dynamic that has arisen since the Iranian Revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 remains a source of regional volatility which manifests in a number of regional conflicts and flashpoints, with the war in Yemen that started in March 2015 being the latest and also the most direct instance of confrontation.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia can be considered regional powers that possess, to varying degrees, the ability to influence or lead countries within a specific geographic area. With a defence budget of US$80.8 billion in 2014, Saudi Arabia ranks third in the world in terms of expenditure on the military (behind the United States and China). While the defence expenditure of Iran formed 2.9 percent of the country’s GDP on average during the years 1988–2014, that of Saudi Arabia formed 10.2 percent.

Of course, the efficacy of the regional roles of Iran and Saudi Arabia is determined by a variety of factors, including their national interests and motivations, the level of threat perception, the regional military balance, and the foreign and domestic political context. That is, the level and degree of regional influence are not static but fluctuate with changing domestic, regional, and global political and strategic circumstances. These fluctuations have indeed characterised Iranian–Saudi relations and their regional foreign policies. This chapter examines a series of stages in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and illustrates their implications for the volatile regional security landscape and balance of power in the Persian Gulf.

The uneasy relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979 indicates a diplomacy deficit that has profoundly exacerbated the volatility and insecurity in the Persian Gulf and beyond. From the Saudi perspective, Iran is an expansionist state that seeks to become a regional hegemon and uses sectarianism to advance its policies. Riyadh’s zero-sum view of Iranian politics has led to a skewed reading of Iran’s regional policy. From Tehran’s perspective, it is Iran that has suffered from its “strategic loneliness,” being a majority Shi’a Persian state surrounded by Sunnis and Arabs that have threatened Iran’s territorial integrity and national security. Iran may not be completely “alone in the world” but it has no clear regional partners or allies. Iran certainly sees itself as a regional power not because it has “expansionist” tendencies, as the Saudis have claimed, but because of its size, resources, demographics, geostrategic location, and culture. Iran’s perception of itself as “first among equals” in the region is crucial to understanding the country’s security mindset. Notwithstanding this, Iran has tried to repair its relations with Saudi Arabia under the Rouhani administration. Contacts between the two countries, although not frequent, have taken place. Even when the two sides use uncompromising rhetoric, they recognise the limits of what they can do. Tehran has not imposed heavy costs on Riyadh for its Yemen adventure, partly because Iranian decision-makers have come to the conclusion that Saudi Arabia is paying high costs for the war. What is clear is that both sides will ultimately come to the realization that the security of the Persian Gulf is not attainable in terms of a zero-sum game.
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Like other Arab Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia, the country that is the focus of this chapter, entered into a transition period in 2015 that had consequences for its internal as well as regional security. In fact, succession concerns raised serious questions about security after-effects because most Gulf leaders were advanced in age. Equally important was the quest for primogeniture, which posed concrete challenges too.

Of course, age as a security factor was not unusual, nor was it exclusive to Saudi Arabia. Others confronted similar challenges though the matter gained momentum when King ’Abdullah died in January 2015. One of the most striking images of the funeral prayers ceremony was the absence of two ageing Gulf leaders—Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed (67) of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Sultan Qaboos of Oman (74)—not because they did not wish to attend but because of health issues. With both men ailing, the prospects grew that their own passing would inject more instability at a time when the Arabian Peninsula confronted undeniable crises ranging from a war in Yemen to overblown but real advances by various extremist groups. To be sure, King ’Abdullah’s successor, Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz (80), and Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah (85), the Emir of Kuwait, were also advanced in age, which further affected the security dimension that conservative Arab Gulf monarchies confronted. Relatively young men ruled Bahrain and Qatar—King Hamad bin ‘Isa (65) and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad (36)—although the Al Khalifa and Al Thani ruling families in the two respective monarchies were not immune to developments in neighbouring states, which further complicated matters.

In fact, it was fair to say that succession issues received much more attention than at any other time in recent memory because of the upheavals that threatened the very stability of most Arab societies. Perhaps one of the best examples of how serious succession matters had become was provided by President Barack Obama, who flew to Saudi Arabia on his way back from India at the head of an impressive American delegation after King ’Abdullah died to offer condolences, confirming Washington’s apprehensions about the process. Even more problematic was the speed with which the new ruler introduced changes. In fact, everyone was taken aback by the 29 April 2015 appointments to office and wished to assess whether the age factor was on King Salman’s mind when he selected his 55-year-old nephew, Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, as heir to the heir apparent. The designation placed Prince Muhammad second in line to the throne before the monarch elevated him to the position of nominal successor post. On his visit, Obama wished to discover the reasons behind the latest changes, and confirm or refute the speculation that the motives behind the selection from among the ruling family’s younger generation were security-related. This was critical because leading powers wished to know whether such winnowing was designed to avoid a power struggle between the grandsons of the founder.

The second security outcome was the quest for primogeniture, which was now firmly established in Bahrain and Qatar as well as several of the member sheikdoms of the UAE. While it was too soon to determine if the primogeniture mechanism would be adopted again in the Sultanate with the next successor, chances were excellent that the next Sultan would restore the system, which had ensured Al Sa’id rule for centuries. Likewise, irrespective of the lateral succession mechanism in place in the Kingdom of Saudi
Arabia, Riyadh toyed with the very idea, especially now that King Salman had appointed his son Muhammad as heir to the heir apparent, and heir to the throne after June 21, 2017. Of course, this was not a done deal by any stretch of the imagination even if the method gained momentum. Suffice it to say that the dramatic changes introduced in the succession line-up on 29 April 2015 upset the proverbial applecart. Indeed, this was a tectonic shift that raised many questions, including the critical quest for a primogeniture system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia was set to experience lateral shifts from existing succession lines because King Salman designated a nephew. If the pre-2011 era saw primogeniture encouraged in Egypt, Libya, and Syria (as well as in Iraq before Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003), what stood out was the propinquity of the mechanism in most Arab monarchies, notably in Bahrain and Qatar, though lateral succession dominated changes in Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Rulers in all four pondered existing methods and were increasingly under pressure to alter them. Ironically, even if Western powers, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, attempted to mould the future of Arab leaderships, those efforts were not always successful. Many pretended to enjoy influence in the incredibly complex winnowing that occurred in strategically significant states, though what truly stood out was the mere realisation that Arab leadership succession matters remained beyond reach to most outsiders. There was, of course, an appreciation that this was probably the most sensitive political issue in the Arab Gulf monarchies and that Western officials ought to tread carefully because of internal, regional, and global security consequences. Towards that end, and aware that whatever changes occurred would only reflect family consensus and internal harmony, most foreign governments interested in flowing transitions adjusted their policies vis-à-vis emerging leaders, since no one could predict who would assume power in any state at any given time.

To be sure, this was a period of transition, with threats all around. It was thus fair to ask what would it take to destabilise Saudi Arabia, although those who anticipated the demise of the Al Sa’ud were bound to be disappointed, especially since Riyadh was amply aware of looming dangers and took decisive measures to counter various threats. Despite frequent assertions that the Arab Gulf monarchies were fragile, conservative ruling families enhanced their legitimacy in the eyes of the only constituents that mattered: their populations. Indeed, barring a complete loss of religious, political, and tribal legitimacy, it is difficult to contemplate what would shake the authority of the ruling families. Naturally, one can expect foreign policy changes on account of changes in leadership, though institutional commitments gave some permanence to the way Riyadh conducts business. It was a given that King Salman and his team would adapt to circumstances even though he could not possibly destroy the framework he had helped build in the first place. Of course, challenges loomed, including succession issues that involved changes to existing mechanisms. In 2016, however, the Al Sa’ud were more secure than at any other time in contemporary history. Their rule was likely to endure precisely because of innate adaptation skills, ranging from the adoption of primogeniture mechanisms to “will-to-power” features under the rule of a legitimate sovereign.
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10. *Youth, Protest, and the New Elite: Domestic Security and Dignity in Kuwait*

Alanoud Alsharekh

This chapter examines the interconnections between generational change in Arabian Gulf societies and the evolving domestic security landscape in the states of the Arabian Peninsula. Over the past fifty years, the population of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has grown at a phenomenal rate (from 4 million in 1950 to 46.5 million in 2010), because of both a growing national population and increased inward migration. The relative youth of the GCC’s native population has compounded the challenges of unemployment (which is between 5 and 15 percent among GCC nationals) and complicated the issues of resource scarcity associated with over-reliance on oil and gas exports as drivers of economic growth, which will only worsen with the post-2014 downturn in oil prices. With time on their hands to carry out acts of defiance and, increasingly, political violence, youth in Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia have been involved in violent anti-government protests since 2011. To ward off political unrest following the Arab Spring protests of 2011, all six GCC states raised salaries for government jobs (the main source of employment for the national population) and promised further job creation, but with young people entering the market in ever increasing numbers and pressures on national budgets to keep subsidizing their lifestyles, this complicated economic issue is fast becoming a political game changer.

The educational system in GCC states has produced a generation of young people who largely fail to meet private-sector hiring standards, while the salary scale, benefits package, and lighter workload make governmental employment highly desirable to most graduates. The availability of a large, skilled immigrant labour force has also stiffened private sector resistance to hiring nationals, and has resulted in overstaffing and masked unemployment in government sectors. The “youth bulge” as a demographic phenomenon (in which increasingly a national population is under the age of 25) has also led to an increase in political discontent and the questioning of societal norms. As a result, young people have been at the forefront of calls for reform since 2011, as witnessed in Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

The increased integration of women into the political and economic fields and the youth bulge phenomenon have provoked resistance to established patriarchal norms that characterise the region. Both groups—women and the youth—have embraced social media tools that encourage self-expression and promote a culture of individualism, which conflict with the self-censorship and kinship-oriented ideals of their parents’ generation. Young people in the GCC also lack reverence for traditions and traditional ruling structures associated with previous generations while remaining conservative in other aspects of their social life. This makes them particularly open to certain forms of politicisation that appeal to this non-traditional conservatism.

In order to accommodate demands for political and economic reforms, GCC governments have embraced some processes of Western democracy. However, the experience of Kuwait and Bahrain has shown that without legitimising political parties with clear social agendas, and without cultivating a mature political middle class to embrace and promote the egalitarian ideals inherent in electoral-based democratic systems, this political transformation will continue to be a chaotic and disruptive process. Through a close examination
of the events that occurred in Kuwait leading up to and in the wake of the “Dignity” protests in 2011–12, this chapter will link the shifting demographic reality with the new landscape of internal challenges to security in the region.

The struggle between the continued isolation and the successful assimilation of the national youth population into both labour markets and political systems is a double bind that the GCC states find themselves facing on a more urgent basis. What the future holds for these educated youths who seem to be unwilling to accept the political parameters of their parents, or who live in countries where the rentier bargain can no longer be upheld as in the past, will dictate many of the domestic security issues in the immediate future of the GCC.

What Kuwait has experienced in terms of collective bargaining by youth and the political representatives who spoke on their behalf, and the subsequent compromises made by the government since 2006, first with the redrawing of electoral districts after the Nabiha Khamsa protests and then with the resignation of the Prime Minister in 2011—a first in the GCC for a ruling family member—has two lessons for the GCC leadership. The first is that there is a real appetite for reform; and once a country commits to it, this will only fuel demands for further reform because the inherent message is that protests work. Secondly, it might be better in the long term not to compromise from the start if there is not a genuine political will to enact real, painful reforms because the corrective security measures to stem the resulting flow of protest and youth demands can be costly on a national and domestic level and hard to maintain. In spite of the current lull in protests, and the fears of exogenous intervention from Iran or IS, demand for greater democratic inclusion is likely to continue to escalate in the Gulf states, and the need for quick, cohesive, and honest re-evaluations of power-sharing between GCC rulers and those they rule can only be delayed for so long.

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The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf

Summary Report

11. The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy Since 2011
Khalid Almezaini

The examination of a state’s external behaviour has long been dominated by studies of superpower states using realism, the main theory in international relations studies. Over the years, this has led to the perception among scholars and policymakers of small states as weak and with a limited role to play in the international system. Yet, the end of the French and British colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, led to the emergence of small states with different capabilities. Certainly, in their early stages, the newly formed small states played only a minimal role in the international system, but after almost forty to fifty years of existence, their role has changed dramatically. Several small states have emerged with considerable capabilities that allow them to influence regional or international systems. In addition, while there are great similarities between most small states that exist in the world, some can be considered an anomaly because of their peculiar external behaviour, such as Israel, Singapore, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The principal objective of this chapter is to analyse why the case of the UAE is considered an anomaly in the conduct of international relations by small states. Moreover, there are particular aspects of the UAE’s behaviour that might provide better understanding of why it is a peculiar case. Since the emergence of the UAE in 1971, the foreign policy of this small state has changed considerably. Small states, in the classical understanding, tend to avoid in engaging in any military action unless it is a reactive behavior affecting their national security. By contrast, the UAE has moved beyond the traditional understanding of small-state behaviour. Since the Arab Spring, the foreign policy of the UAE has come to be characterized by the use of both soft and hard power through the overt resort to military diplomacy. The country’s development of one of the most advanced air forces in the region has given it a confidence in engaging militarily at different levels within the Middle East and North Africa region. The case of the UAE thus necessitates a reassessment of the traditional view that small states react to regional and international political instabilities under the umbrella of strong and larger states. Instead, the UAE has opted to act individually and in alliance with regional powers, in response to security issues arising from perceived domestic and regional threats.

The case of the UAE will show that there are distinctive small states that can influence the international system through their economic and military capabilities, as well as their diplomatic skills. The chapter is structured around the following questions: Firstly, to what extent has the UAE’s external behavior changed since 2011? Secondly, what led this small state to combine the use of both soft and hard power? Thirdly, to what extent does the case of this small state reflect a return of realism and structural realism in the analysis of small-state behaviour. These questions will be answered within five sections. The first provides a conceptual definition and analysis of small states; the second consists of a brief background to UAE foreign policy before 2011; the third examines the UAE’s changed behaviour since 2011; the fourth looks at the shifting combination of soft and hard power; while the fifth offers a perspective on the small state and the return of realism.
Since 2011, the foreign policy decisions of the UAE have gone beyond traditional small-state behaviours. Especially with regard to the mixing of “hard” and “soft” power in the region, the UAE has performed unilaterally and independently, such as in Libya, instead of acting under the umbrella of stronger and larger states. In addition, in bilateral alliance with other regional powers such as the alliance against ISIS or with Saudi Arabia in Yemen, the UAE has shown its power above and beyond the capacity of a classical small state. The aspiration to become a strong, influential small state has helped the UAE to seek alternative security arrangements, which have had profound consequences for multiple zones of regional conflict across the Arab world.

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