

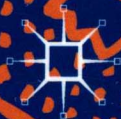


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REFORM IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST**

Between Iran and the  
“Arab Spring”

**Yoel Guzansky**



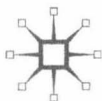
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# The Arab Gulf States and Reform in the Middle East: Between Iran and the “Arab Spring”

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## List of Abbreviations

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
ARAMCO	Arabian American Oil Company
BICI	Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
POMED	Project on Middle East Democracy
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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# 1

## Introduction: Defensive Monarchies

**Abstract:** *This book will discuss Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states, the threats with which they must contend, and the manner in which they are choosing to do so. While the focus of this analysis will revolve around the relations of these Arab Gulf states with Iran, a country that has played a central role in their threat perception since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, this research will also consider the relations with each other and with the United States, and the effect of other regional events and forces that impact considerations, chief among them the Arab Upheavals.*

**Keywords:** “Arab Spring”; GCC; Iran; Israel; Saudi Arabia

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The Arab Gulf states' – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman<sup>1</sup> – proximity to, interests in, and concerns with Iran and Iraq, as well as their responses to and experiences with the "Arab Spring," have increasingly pulled them into the limelight, resulting in significant attention both from academic scholars and mainstream media. While the importance of access to energy resources in the Gulf is nothing new – 47 percent of the total proven global oil reserves and 42 percent of the total proven global gas reserves are in the Gulf<sup>2</sup> – the various developments in and around the Arabian Peninsula, along with the ever-present potential for the Gulf<sup>3</sup> to once again become a theater of war, make it clear that this region will continue to be a central for regional and global security. This analysis seeks to follow the main trends in Gulf security in light of the changes in the regional and international arena, while examining the relationship between external and internal threats, which are intertwined in the Gulf security agenda. Length constraints make it impossible to effectively cover all aspects of regional security. Therefore, the requisite foci here will be those outlined earlier.

The Gulf states have unique characteristics. Their populations are limited, and they have small, unskilled armies. Nevertheless, they have been blessed with tremendous wealth. This has not only allowed them to attract allies but also caused them to be a target for subversion, terror, and even, as in the case of the UAE, occupation of territories. In recent years, they have contended with a series of internal and external challenges. These include rapid demographic changes, namely, increasingly youthful and unemployed populations, the rise of radical and political Islam, the growing understanding of the limitations of dependence on oil income to maintain political stability and development and difficulties in diversifying economically, the perceived need for enormous expenditures on advanced weaponry, continued reliance on the West for defense, and, growing regional threats in the form of Iran, which is working to acquire nuclear capability, Iraq, which is in the process of a possible disintegration, Yemen, whose prospects for stability is questionable and the "Arab Spring," whose long-term effects remain to be seen.

A large portion of the research concerning Gulf security focuses on the competition, conflicts, and balance of power among the larger and more powerful countries located along its coasts, that is, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. This is understandable, given the impact of the regional events that have occurred since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, namely, several

global energy crises, three regional wars, cycles of terror, prolonged outside intervention, and low-intensity conflicts, all of which create a situation of ongoing crisis.

The first part of this analysis focuses on the historical security patterns of the six Gulf Arab states; the establishment of a central, regional institution, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); and the security challenges it faces, including those that occur against the background of intra-GCC rivalries and conflicts.

The first chapter reviews the impact of British hegemony on the security architecture of the Gulf in general, and the six Gulf Arab states in particular, which is still evident today. The undermining of the regional order for which Britain was responsible led the United States to gradually increase its involvement in the region. First and foremost, it sought to ensure continued free access to the Gulf economy, yet it was not immediately prepared to wholly fill its predecessor's shoes. US policy was intended to maintain equilibrium among the three aforementioned major states in the Gulf while striving to balance the material advantages of its presence in the area with the political price this presence brings, and the dependence that the Gulf states have developed on outside forces. Also included will be a related discussion concerning American policy vis-à-vis Iran and the American attitude toward continued involvement in the Middle East in general.

The second chapter discusses the motivations for establishing the sub-region's main institution, the exclusive [Sunni Monarchy] GCC, its ability to promote cooperation among its six members, and its contribution to regional security. The undermining of the status quo in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War increased the fears of the Gulf states and led them, for the first time, to recognize the importance of establishing a framework for defense cooperation. However, more than three decades after its creation, at a time when security threats appear to be growing, GCC members are still finding it difficult to formulate an agreed-upon policy on foreign affairs, defense issues, and even certain economic issues. The most recent and representative example is the complications that have accompanied the Saudi-led attempts to form a more cohesive “Gulf union.” This part ends with an analysis on the subject of GCC security collaboration. This chapter traces the ups and downs of defense cooperation between the Arab Gulf nations, focusing on the establishment of the GCC and the joint Peninsula Shield Force, crucial milestones in Arab Gulf security coordination.

The second part of this book discusses the complex relations each of the six Arab Gulf states has with Iran, including Saudi Arabia and its attempts to confront the rise of Iran, its main ideological and geostrategic rival; Kuwait, which is strongly affected by its geographic proximity to Iran, accused of subversive activity, and by the presence of a considerable number of Kuwaiti Shiites; Qatar, which, in contrast to the other GCC members, has adopted a more independent foreign policy that tends not to be identified with one camp, and which is meant to strengthen its position and immunize itself from radical elements; the UAE, whose relations are influenced by extensive commercial ties (particularly with Dubai), on the one hand, and Iran's occupation of three islands in the Gulf claimed by the UAE on the other; Bahrain, which largely blames its extensive unrest since 2011 on the influence of an "outside actor" (i.e., Iran), leading Bahrain to perceive Iran as its main threat to national security and to undertake efforts to strengthen the Gulf Arab front vis-à-vis Iran and its allies; and Oman, which to a large extent operates outside the GCC consensus preferring, in many cases, to sit on the fence in its foreign policy, faithfully representing its geographic location on the edge of the Gulf, its modest economic and military capabilities, and its unique Ibadi character.

A final chapter in this part is dealing with the situation in Yemen. The civil unrest that has gripped the nation since January 2011, inspired by the upheavals elsewhere in the Arab world, has intensified existing trends and accelerated processes liable to lead to state failure. The hope had been that Saleh's resignation as president would contain the Yemeni revolution and, more importantly, the serious situation of the country, but so far the hoped-for stability has not materialized. On the contrary, the Yemeni revolution has further weakened the central government and resulted in increased Iranian and al-Qaeda influence.

Part III will review the GCC response to the regional upheavals, focusing on the varying reactions and tactics employed by the six states to combat or mitigate internal unrest and potential regional instability, with a particular emphasis on the varying responses of each state according to its interests, resources, demographics, and domestic unrest (or lack thereof). The fourth and last part will analyze Israel-GCC relations in light of shared interests and gradual, tacit rapprochement. Both sides are eager to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear capability and would like to curb Iranian attempts to attain regional hegemony. In addition, both are perturbed by recent developments in US policy, particularly the

reluctance to use force against Syria, and signs of a gradual shift away from the problems of the Middle East. However, in spite of the convergence of interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states, full normalization is not on the agenda as long as there is no significant political breakthrough between Israel and the Palestinians. At the same time, there is a wide range between full diplomatic relations and a total lack of contact, and the two sides can take advantage of this.

## Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this book, these six states will be referred to as the “Gulf Arab states,” the “Gulf states,” or the GCC states.
- 2 BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 63rd edition, June 2014.
- 3 The Gulf, which is mainly known as the “Persian Gulf” and is sometimes called the “Arab Gulf,” will, in most instances, be called in this memorandum by its neutral name, “the Gulf.” The dispute between the Arab Gulf states and Iran over the name is more semantic. The UN was even asked to address this issue, and it established a committee of experts, which chose the name “Persian Gulf,” claiming that this was for geographic, historical, and legal reasons. See United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Working Paper No. 61, *Historical, Geographical and Legal Validity of the Name: Persian Gulf*, Vienna, 2006.

# Part I

## Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf



# 2

## The Changing Dynamic of American–GCC Relations

*Abstract: In spite of the Gulf states' dependence on external support, in particular that of the United States, they have begun to question Washington's willingness to guarantee their security and provide political reinforcement. This is a direct result of US policy toward America's Arab allies during the "Arab Spring," toward Syria, and the possible rapprochement between Iran and the United States. These doubts are liable to affect the willingness of the Gulf states to tow America's line in the region. The sense among some of the Gulf elite is that, while no good alternative to the United States' military power exists, particularly as a counterweight to Iran's growing strength, America's steadfastness in the region is in question.*

**Keywords:** "Arab Spring"; GCC; Iran; nuclear; US

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The Gulf states' dependence on external security and the need for foreign players to have access to the Gulf's economy has not changed significantly in the past one hundred years, and it appears that it will continue in this manner for at least the foreseeable future. In general, the basic security problems facing the six Gulf states stem from the fact that most are territorially small, with limited populations and correspondingly small armies lacking in combat experience. However, they are wealthy countries with about half of the world's oil and gas reserves, a combination that has made them a preferred target for terrorism, subversion, and takeover attempts.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the upheavals in the Gulf over the years – ranging from inter-tribal struggles to British hegemony to today's conflict over the Iranian nuclear program – the basic security pattern of the states located along its western coast has remained consistent over the years, that is, heavily reliant upon foreign forces for protection. There is little doubt that the extensive focus on Gulf security has stemmed primarily from international interest in accessing and safeguarding energy sources. The geostrategic importance of the Gulf, however, began prior to the discovery of oil and gas in the 20th century.

The British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 symbolized the end of Britain's connection to the area, which had existed for some 150 years. Britain maintained its presence in the Gulf even after releasing its grip on most of its colonies around the world in 1947. Historians differ as to the main motivation behind its Gulf involvement. One school emphasizes the strategic dimension of British imperialism, particularly in the 19th century, which was intended to protect India.<sup>2</sup> Historians who hail from another school argue that Britain acted mainly out of commercial-economic considerations and from the need to protect markets and shipping routes.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there were issues requiring Britain's attention, such as eliminating naval piracy and the slave trade and arms trade in the Gulf – which, to a large extent, indirectly and unintentionally laid the foundations for British hegemony there.

Although the Gulf sheikhdoms were considered foreign territory and were headed by independent rulers, their status vis-à-vis the British government turned them unofficially into part of the British Empire. Their state infrastructure, starting with public services and the educational system, and including military units and defense units, were organized along British lines and were even administered by representatives of the Crown. The fear of the British government that it would lose