

ISSUE BRIEF

BY RICHARD LEBARON

Building a Better US-Gulf Partnership

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Tension between the United States and its partners in the Gulf flared up visibly in the last several months, notably with Saudi Arabia's public displays of displeasure with the US approach to the Syria conflict, nervousness about an interim nuclear deal with Iran, and sharp differences over Egypt. Gulf distrust of US intentions and actions is nothing new, and is in no small part rooted in the Gulf states' deep frustration with how the United States executed the war in Iraq, which they perceive as placing Iraq under Iran's sphere of influence. But these latest tensions also point to a fundamental gap in expectations about the US role in the region and its commitment to security for the Gulf states.

There will never be a total confluence of US and Gulf interests, but there is far more room for greater convergence and better practical cooperation to address shared interests where they do exist. There is a particular need for a more strategic, less transactional, approach to the relationship at this time of declining US imports of oil from Gulf states, diminishing defense budgets in the United States, growing defense capabilities in the Gulf, a US public that looks skeptically at US engagement in the Middle East in general, and a White House that does not appear to put the US relationship with the Gulf states high on its priority list. The United States and the Gulf states will also continue to grapple with the profound political and economic transition in the Middle East and the regional ambitions of Iran.

In order to build on shared interests, the United States should work with its Gulf partners on two specific projects:

1. **Develop and implement a medium-term plan to achieve sustainable economic progress in Egypt and other transitioning Middle East and North Africa states**, in cooperation with the international financial institutions and other key players.
2. **Create a genuine "strategic" US-Gulf dialogue** about how to ensure Gulf security in the face of various challenges in the coming years that would build on a set of strong existing security linkages. This would recognize both a continuing US role for some time but also focus on preparing the Gulf states to assume more responsibility for their own security.

[Finding a Constructive Path for Egypt](#)

The differing US and Gulf reactions to the July 2013 military ouster of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt provided a stark illustration of different Gulf and US approaches to change in Egypt. The Saudis, Emiratis, and Kuwaitis rushed to praise the Egyptian military for restoring stability. Saudi leaders referred to foreign influence (i.e., the United States) being countered in Egypt and boasted that vast Gulf resources could support Egypt should Western aid be

cut.¹ The three Gulf states quickly replaced Qatar as the main sources of Gulf support for Egypt. The United States chose to delay some of its civilian and military aid while monitoring progress toward civilian-run democracy. However, despite the over-heated public statements, it would be a mistake to contend that the United States and Gulf states are poles apart in their interests in Egypt. In fact, they all have a strong interest in the rapid emergence of an Egypt that is politically stable and economically viable.

In the hierarchy of foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis Egypt, the Gulf states place stability at the top of the list. Despite rhetoric in US President Barack Obama's landmark May 2011 speech that seemed to indicate the United States would place greater emphasis on supporting democratic development, the past year has demonstrated that in fact the administration has not placed democracy promotion ahead of achieving stability in Egypt, best illustrated by the tepid and confusing US reaction to the military takeover. In part as a response to the extremely bumpy path in Egypt and other transitioning countries over the past two years, the United States has downgraded its emphasis on democracy support and reverted to its fundamental interest in preserving stability. Gulf states may not necessarily agree with the United States that accountable representative government is a requirement for long-term stability, but **the United States and the Gulf states have a shared interest in ensuring that Egypt proceeds along a peaceful path toward full political participation and broad economic growth benefiting ordinary Egyptians.** The transition to a more inclusive arrangement in Egypt will be long and difficult,² which is all the more reason for Gulf states, the United States, the European Union (EU), and international financial institutions to agree on a basic approach to supporting that transition in partnership rather than in competition.

1 Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, for example, said that "To those who have announced they are cutting their aid to Egypt, or threatening to do that, (we say that) Arab and Muslim nations are rich...and will not hesitate to help Egypt." See "Saudi Arabia Says Arabs Ready to Cover Cuts in Western Aid to Egypt," *Al Arabiya*, August 19, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/19/Saudi-Arabia-says-Arabs-ready-cover-cuts-in-Western-aid-to-Egypt.html>.

2 For more detail on key political complications, see Michele Dunne, "Egypt's Transition Roadmap: Main Event or Sideshow?" *EgyptSource*, Atlantic Council, November 5, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/egypt-s-transition-roadmap-main-event-or-sideshow>.

Aid is Not the Answer to Egypt's Problems

Foreign assistance has helped stabilize the Egyptian economy and prevent it from becoming a failed state, but it cannot be the ultimate engine of the rapid growth that Egypt needs to produce jobs.³ Nor does foreign aid provide the degree of political influence sometimes attributed to it. Aid, whether from Arab or Western sources, is a source of popular resentment in Egypt; current Gulf benefactors are unlikely to indefinitely avoid the negative reactions in Egypt that greeted Qatari aid. And, to the chagrin of successive US ambassadors, US aid has never had a measurable positive impact on Egyptian attitudes toward the United States, despite the fact that assistance from the United States financed much of Egypt's current infrastructure and most of its modern military equipment. Egyptians, a proud people with a cherished history, largely resent the implication of dependency that accompanies outside assistance.

As wealthy as they are, Gulf donors will not tolerate huge outflows to Egypt indefinitely and have begun to note this publicly. Emirati Deputy Prime Minister Mansour Bin Zayed told Egyptian Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi in October 2013 that "Arab support for Egypt will not last long, and Egypt has to think about innovative solutions rather than traditional ones."⁴ **Ultimately, foreign aid is not the key to either stability or prosperity for Egypt, and private sector activity—both domestic and international—will be critical to stimulating greater economic growth.**

Some in the Gulf believe that the bulk of Egypt's economic problems are self-inflicted and that adequate capital would flow into Egypt if the country instituted proper conditions. Indeed, even Bin Zayed pointed to the need to provide adequate protection for foreign investors in Egypt, reflecting broad consensus in the international business community that conditions must be improved and modernized if Egypt hopes to rescue itself. In a private conversation with the author, a Kuwaiti banker attested to the lack of adequate legal protection for investors, high tariff barriers, stifling

3 Mohsin Khan and Richard LeBaron, "What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?" *MENASource*, Atlantic Council, July 11, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/what-will-the-gulfs-12-billion-buy-in-egypt>.

4 "UAE Deputy Prime Minister to Beblawi: 'Arab Support for Egypt Will Not Last Long,'" translation from Arabic, *Al-Masry Al-Yom*, October 27, 2013.

bureaucracy, and a system of subsidies producing unsustainable deficits—all of which disincentivize much-needed foreign investment.

Unfortunately, Egypt's various interim authorities have put off decisions about economic reform in favor of populist moves. And reliance on Gulf aid for several years could result in continued postponement of needed economic reforms, as noted by Sultan al Qassemi, an Emirati analyst who follows Gulf ties to Egypt. Qassemi points out that Gulf states want Egypt to be a bulwark against Iranian expansion, but it will not be able to fulfill that role without a strong economy with good ties to Europe and the United States.⁵

Finding Common Ground in Economic Reforms

The Gulf States and the United States, along with the EU and other international actors, urgently need to find enough common ground in their policies toward Egypt to promote the country's economic development. Aid from the Gulf can help Egypt muddle through, but it cannot produce the private sector investment needed in Egypt that will only come when the economic signals and incentives are positive. A program by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will be needed to set the stage for such a new period of sustained growth in the Egyptian economy.⁶ An IMF program would assist Egypt to embark on serious economic reform, with most experts pointing to reduction of fuel subsidies as the most urgent and obvious reform. Judicial reform and streamlining of the arbitrary and archaic government bureaucracy regulating foreign investment are also urgent.

Aid from the Gulf states could be instrumental in helping Egypt provide a safety net as it embarks on reforms necessary to attract investment, and should be consciously employed for this purpose, with Gulf countries and the IMF leading the effort.

Such an approach has several advantages for Gulf patrons. It provides a bridge between short- and medium-term economic objectives, and it allows Gulf

aid to be used productively while still giving a measure of political "credit" to Gulf benefactors. It provides Gulf donors with an eventual exit strategy as foreign investment and flight capital begin to return to Egypt in response to an IMF reform program, thus alleviating the need for large Gulf cash infusions. At the same time, this approach offers a path back to participation in the Egyptian economy for foreign investors from around the world.

Some Gulf governments are willing to offer additional support for private sector investment with, for example, some momentum being achieved around an "Arab Stabilization Plan" that would focus on job-producing public-private infrastructure projects in Egypt and other transition countries in the region.⁷ Alongside these Gulf efforts, resumption of technical assistance to Egypt from hesitant Western donors, including the United States, should be keyed to a coordinated Gulf-and-IMF-led effort to support needed economic reforms. All donors should be driven by the objective of gradually weaning Egypt off of foreign assistance, with economic growth driven by domestic and foreign private investment.

There are those who argue that the economy was doing well during the last years of Mubarak's rule in Egypt, and thus it makes sense to emulate that stable political arrangement for the next several years. This is, of course, an insult to the Egyptian people. Political change will come in fits and starts, but individual empowerment and integration with the world through technology has changed the political landscape in the Middle East in a way that will make any authoritarian model in Egypt very difficult to sustain.

While the primary focus should be on Egypt, a constructive United States-Gulf partnership could have applicability to other countries where the United States and Gulf states share interests, including Tunisia, Jordan, and Yemen. But given the size of Egypt, the impact of its fate on the rest of the region, and the critical place it holds for Gulf and US strategic objectives, the main effort should be on a Gulf-led international partnership to put Egypt on a sustainable path forward.

⁵ "Stability or Democracy: What do Gulf States Want for Egypt?" event, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, August 20, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/past-events/stability-or-democracy-what-do-gulf-states-want-for-egypt>.

⁶ An IMF program has been under discussion since Mubarak's ouster, but the various interim military and civilian governments have avoided any commitments to necessary reforms.

⁷ For more details on the Arab Stabilization Plan, see <http://www.arabplan.org/>.

At the same time, the United States and its Gulf partners need to focus on the defense and security challenges they face now and in the coming decades.

Questions about US Commitments to Gulf Defense

"I'm not sure that we're ever going to get a majority of the American people, after over a decade of war, after what happened in Iraq, to say that any military action, particularly in the Middle East, makes sense in the absence of some direct threat or attack against us." —President Obama, September 8, 2013⁸

President Obama's remark to an interviewer earlier this fall, as he was unsuccessfully attempting to secure Congressional approval for a limited strike against targets in Syria, surely seemed to him to be a simple description of reality. It is nonetheless a startling statement, with implications for US commitments around the world, not least in the Gulf. The president accurately captured the mood of the American public, which for the most part simply does not want to hear about the Middle East, as well as a deep skepticism about any new US involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts among the US military leadership and both Democratic and Republican members of Congress. The huge commitments by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the smaller use of force in Libya, not only failed to produce outcomes that Americans can point to with pride, but many believe the United States stumbled into sectarian and ethnic struggles and made them worse. At the same time, Americans are hearing constantly that they will be soon be free from dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

Given the domestic political complexities that came into sharp relief with the decision not to employ US force against the Syrian regime, it seems clear that the US commitment to Gulf security cannot be considered as unequivocal as it may have been assumed previously. It is not clear what sort of conflict in the region would actually result in commitment of US forces, particularly if those decisions require, either legally or politically, referral to the US Congress. The clear hesitance on the part of President Obama to take military action in Syria

⁸ Barack Obama, interview by Gwen Ifill, *Newshour*, PBS, September 9, 2013, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/july-dec13/obama_09-09.html.

was interpreted by many in the Gulf—and elsewhere—as a wavering commitment to their security as well. And it is not clear what sort of attack by Iran on a Gulf state would automatically draw the United States into sustained action to repel or punish it. Gulf leaders are surely asking themselves whether an Iranian-inspired terrorist attack on their soil would compel the United States to act, or, for example, if a limited and ineffective missile attack would prompt a robust US response to defend its Gulf allies.

The lack of clarity about the use of US force coexists paradoxically with continued reach and influence of the US military and US defense firms in individual Gulf states, with numerous defense agreements, (secret and otherwise), along with bases in four of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. To help them face the threat posed by Iran, the United States has helped the Gulf states build up vast new and sophisticated defense capabilities to the point where Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, boast air force capabilities that appear to be vastly superior to the Iranian air force.⁹ The United States provides the technical infrastructure for missile defense in the Gulf in the absence of a fully linked and coordinated Gulf system, controlled and operated by Gulf state militaries. But even with all these US military hardware and defense linkages, senior US officials still feel the need to allay the doubts by publicly reiterating the US commitment to defend Gulf states from outside attack—clear evidence that the relationships with Gulf allies are fraying.

No Longer Only a US Responsibility

With the likely continued decline in US defense spending, the need for other importers of Gulf oil to contribute to ensuring security of the Strait of Hormuz will become increasingly important. With more than 85 percent of the crude oil that passes

⁹ Documentation about the arms buildup in the Gulf can be found in reports by the Congressional Research Service, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/mideast/index.html>; Anthony Cordesman, et al., *US-Iranian Strategic Competition: The Gulf Military Balance-I* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 6, 2013), http://csis.org/files/publication/120221_Iran_Gulf_MilBal_ConvAsym.pdf; Cordesman and Bryan Gold, *The Gulf Military Balance Volume II: The Missile and Nuclear Dimensions and Options for Deterrence, Defense, Containment, and Preventive Strikes* (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 2013), http://csis.org/files/publication/120222_Iran_Gulf_Mil_Bal_II_WMD.pdf.

through the Strait going to Asian markets,¹⁰ there is no clear rationale for major importers to “free ride” on the US Navy to secure their oil supplies. Energy flow security from the Gulf could and should become a more widely shared international responsibility. This is not a zero sum game—Chinese ships patrolling in the Gulf would not necessarily threaten US strategic interests, for example. More burden-sharing will reflect the realities of international trade and does not in itself detract from the US-Gulf defense relationship. In fact, more powers having a greater stake in protection of oil routes could provide an additional degree of protection for both the Gulf states and the consumers of their oil.

The GCC states will also have to continue to take on more of the burden for their own security. To do this, they may need some new technologies and weapons systems, but the main effort should focus on coordination of the defensive systems they possess or have in the pipeline. This sounds like a relatively straightforward proposition, but the rivalries among GCC states, the urge for national control of key assets, and the dependence on the United States have all militated against genuine defense cooperation and joint planning. Intermittent talk about “Gulf Union” masks deep differences, including over how aggressive the GCC should be in its Iran policy and over more technical issues of command and control for use of Gulf forces. An effective joint GCC military capability is a long way off, yet far more could be done to leverage the individual capacities of each of the Gulf states.

Should negotiations with Iran ultimately fail and if Iran is able to deploy a nuclear weapon or reach breakout nuclear capacity, the United States and the Gulf states will be faced with big decisions. Saudi Arabia will need to decide whether to acquire nuclear weapons.¹¹ It seems unlikely that public opinion in the United States or Saudi Arabia would permit an explicit agreement that the United States provide a nuclear umbrella for

the Gulf, which would perforce define and limit both countries’ options in case of an attack.

Creating a Real Strategic Dialogue on Gulf Defense

Multilateral consultative mechanisms, whether bilateral or multilateral, employed between the Gulf countries and the United States are not adequately addressing the web of issues described above. The conversations now are all tactics and almost no strategy, lurching from focus on Syria, to Iran, to Iraq, to counterterrorism, or specific weapons systems. The United States and Gulf countries should embark on systematic, serious conversations about longer-term prospects for the US role in the Gulf, the burden the Gulf will carry on its own, and cooperation on regional problems that extends beyond the current fractious and ad hoc approach. **The mix of bilateral agreements, tacit understandings, oil dependence, and personal relationships that has held US-Gulf relations together since Franklin D. Roosevelt met Saudi King Ibn Saud in 1945 needs to be thoroughly reviewed and updated.**

Despite the massive flow of arms into the area, Gulf partners still require the United States as a guarantor of their defense and are not seeking similar arrangements with Europe, Russia, or China. In an effort to deepen multilateral cooperation, then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her GCC counterparts created the US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum in March 2012. The Forum complements and subsumes the regular meeting of US and GCC foreign ministers on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The Forum and its working groups focus on counterterrorism, ballistic missile defense, nonproliferation, maritime security, and interoperability of Gulf defensive systems. However, so far the ministerial meetings have been consumed by the burning issues of the day, most recently the Syria crisis. The working groups are producing limited results, mainly pointing to good intentions to work toward enhanced US-GCC coordination on ballistic missile defense, expand the capacity of the GCC Maritime Operations Center in Bahrain, and continue to improve the unity of the GCC in defense planning.¹²

10 US Energy Administration, *World Oil Transit Chokepoints*, August 22, 2012, http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf. Japan, India, South Korea, and China are the main users of oil that transits the Strait of Hormuz.

11 One route for Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons capability would be to obtain it from Pakistan. This idea, which has received more attention lately, harkens back to the idea of either Egypt or Saudi Arabia becoming the custodians of the “Islamic bomb.”

12 US Department of State, “Joint Communiqué From the Third Ministerial Meeting for the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum,” September 26, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214834.htm>.

Although it has not met expectations so far, with some fine tuning, the US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum could be a useful instrument to carry out these strategic discussions and eventually engage in strategic planning. Used with care and focus, the Strategic Cooperation Forum could be used to help clarify US obligations, build greater coherence into Gulf state deterrent capabilities, and respond to emerging threats, whether they come from regional powers or from transnational threats such as cyber warfare.

relationship that would have positive ramifications throughout the Middle East.

The primary interest that drove US officials to pursue this enhanced cooperation with the GCC was the need for greater coordination among Gulf militaries to deter and/or respond to an Iranian attack. Such defenses will be needed regardless of the outcome of nuclear talks. However, Gulf states have been slow to integrate their air and missile defense systems. A web of bilateral defense commitments and arrangements connects the United States to each of the GCC countries individually, but not to the GCC as a workable collective security entity. The United States has been satisfied so far with primarily bilateral approaches with Gulf states, but this no longer seems defensible in a time of decreasing US resources. As part of a comprehensive review of defense cooperation with the Gulf, the United States will need to pay much more attention to the idea and the specific characteristics of a Gulf union, just as it took a strong interest in the development of the European Community, and eventual Union, since World War II.

The Way Ahead

US-Gulf ties are not in crisis, but they have reached a point where erosion seems to be the theme rather than innovation and progress. Change will come inevitably, driven by the changing petroleum flows, budget constraints in the United States, the evolving role of China, and by the development of more powerful and capable militaries in the Gulf. The decision for the United States and for its Gulf partners is whether to let that change play out on its own or to get ahead of the problem and insert a new dynamic into this relationship. This will be a project requiring high-level US attention over many years, not just a meeting here or there to provide reassuring pledges of fidelity. A new approach to both Gulf security and fostering economic progress in Egypt could go a long way toward developing a mature and enduring US-Gulf

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