Gulf Diplomacy in a Shifting Middle East: Continuity, Change, and Implications for The United States

Thursday, October 24, 2013
Washington, D.C.

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FREDERIC WEHREY: Good morning, everyone. Good morning.

I'm Fred Wehrey, senior associate at the Middle East program at the Carnegie Endowment. I'm delighted to welcome you to today's panel on “Gulf Diplomacy in a Shifting Middle East.”

As we all know, comments in recent days by senior Saudi officials have really cast the world's attention on a growing chasm between the U.S. and the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, over regional order. Of course, Syria has been at the eye of the storm in this. The disagreements extend to a range of portfolios, Iran, Egypt, the Arab-Israeli impasse.

Many see these differences as heralding an unprecedented divorce in bilateral relations, with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf soliciting other patrons, perhaps, pursuing a more muscular, unilateral path. Others, however, foresee greater continuity, with perhaps slight divergences by the Gulf as a form of hedging. Whatever a – whatever the case, the Gulf states have been confronted with a rapidly shifting regional landscape in the Middle East. Old assumptions are being challenged, old paradigms being reworked.

Now, the key question underlying all of this, which really forms the basis for today’s discussion, is so what? What do these disagreements mean for the future of U.S.-Gulf cooperation, for U.S. interests in the region? And more specifically, what's new and different about this recent episode that we’re facing? After all, I think we can point to a long string of disagreements between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf and the threats of greater unilateralism by Riyadh extending back through the Iraq War to 2002, even farther back, we could say, to the Nasser period.

The question now is how does the Gulf operationalize their grievances; what are their options? And while it is certainly appropriate to focus on this panel on Saudi Arabia, we also want to highlight positions of the smaller GCC states, how they may or may not align with those of the Saudis and what this means for the ability of the GCC to act more independently.

Now, to shed light on these questions, I’m really delighted to welcome four friends and top scholars of this region who each approached these issues with a different perspective, a different lens. Two of them have joined us directly from the Gulf, and we’re thrilled that they’ve made this long trek.

To my right is Dr. Abdullah Al Shayji, a professor of international relations and the chairman of the political science department at Kuwait University. I think he embodies that elusive combination of being a prolific commentator on Gulf affairs in the media and a top scholar of the international relations of this region. And he’s the author of an Arabic book with the very telling title “Kuwait: The Ceaseless Quest for Survival in a Hostile Environment.”
He’s joined by Dr. Mehran Kamrava is – who is a professor and the director of the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar. He too is a prolific author with diverse research interests spanning the intellectual history of Iran, nuclear proliferation and Gulf international relations. And most recently, he’s the author of a very timely book on Qatar’s regional role with Cornell University Press entitled “Qatar: Small State, Big Politics.”

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And our last two speakers will focus exclusively on Saudi Arabia. Fahad Nazer originally hails from Jeddah. He’s a former political analyst at the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, D.C. He too is a prolific author and commentator on Gulf affairs. His writings have appeared in The New York Times, Foreign Policy and Al-Monitor. And in reading these pieces, I’ve really been struck by his ability to present a degree of richness and insight that only comes from firsthand access to this country.

And rounding out the panel is Professor Greg Gause from the University of Vermont. He is also a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. A longtime student of Saudi politics, he’s the author of a seminal book on the Gulf’s intraregional politics, entitled “The International Relations of the Gulf,” with Cambridge University, and more specifically a more recent piece with Brookings on Saudi reactions to the nascent warming of relations between the U.S. and Iran.

Now, to allow for question and answer, I’ve asked each speaker to limit their remarks to about 10 to 12 minutes. And I’ll ask the audience in the Q-and-A period to please ask a question and not deliver statement out of courtesy to the rest of the audience. And at this time, please turn off or silence your cellphones.

And with that, Dr. Abdullah, I’ll turn it over to you.

[00:05:08]

ABDULLAH AL SHAYJI: So we’re going to start with me.

Good afternoon everybody. Thank you, Fred. I’m really glad to be here. I’m honored to be here in this esteemed gathering with some of my old friends, especially Greg, who I haven’t seen in a couple of years. And I’m really glad that I am at Carnegie in Washington, D.C., and the timing could not have been better. So I’m glad to be here.

This is my third talk in the last four days. I gave the first talk with Iran charming offensive and GCC view at CSIS, the Gulf round table there, and a couple days ago at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, caused a ruckus with some of the panelists.

And today I’m here to talk about the widening trust deficit between the GCC states and the U.S., although it’s not that alarming, but it needs to be addressed, looked at and thought of, especially with the latest developments that have been
percolating for the last couple of years, i.e., particularly since the Arab Spring took off 2 ½, almost three years ago, and the relationship has not been on the same page, not syncing and not seeing eye to eye on many issues. And the latest flare of criticism and – the Saudis – the Saudis taking a harsher or more hawkish position and approach is an indicative in my opinion of a – the piling up of all these, what I call disagreements, grievances and not seeing eye to eye.

[00:07:05]

So something here is amiss, in my opinion, between the two major allies, United States on one hand and the GCC countries, although the relationship withstood, as Fred – and I agree him – stated, tumultuous periods, ups and downs, thick and thin. Disagreements go back to the Arab-Israeli conflict and drags on – while highlighted by the 9/11 and the finger pointing at the Saudis and the role of the GCC in seeing different approaches with the United States.

But the catalyst was during the Arab Spring and how the Americans let go of their very staunch ally, first of all, Tunisia President Ben Ali and then the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak. And that was a déjà vu all over again. Got – it went back to the (shah ?) days, how also the United States let go of the shah.

So – but today, with all the developments that has taken place over the last few years, we see, especially lately, with the Syrian issue, with the wavering – we see a lot of noncommittal position by United States. The U-turn that was made by President Obama over Syria was really heart-wrenching for the region and for the United States’ allies. When push comes to shove, could we still rely and depend on United States to deliver, especially – as you know, the United States is the main patron and protector of the GCC countries, including – especially the smaller Gulf states, who felt that maybe a collective question was raised, what if the Iranians tried to do more shenanigans and more meddling in our affairs; can we rely on the United States? And that was before the charm offensive and the famous phone call between President Obama, who initiated the phone call, not the other way around. And you should have read – and so the glee and the euphoria in the Iranian Farsi and maybe in the Arabic pro-Iran media, in the Arab world, especially in Lebanon and Syria, where they saw this as a major victory for the – for the Iranians and the major capitulation by the United States.

[00:09:49]

So we see now United States from a – from a GCC perspective as noncommittal after Syria and after the overture with Iran that has really unraveled the GCC states. We see wavering, we see fatigue, we see – we see less activism – U.S. presence in foreign policy. We saw before that the withdrawal from Iraq, the drawdown in Afghanistan. We saw that there is a strategic here mismatch of United States willpower, might – on top of all of that, we saw also a problem with Washington regarding its inward looking.

It was so dismaying for me personally, when I followed the debacle over the sequestration first and then the shutdown of Washington reminding me of the dysfunctional politics in Kuwait – (laughter) – between our feisty parliament and the – but we did not shut down the government there, but we – there’s a lot of frictions and feud, but we did not get to the level of shutting down the government as you did for 16 days in the United States.
So there is fatigue, there is dysfunctional element, there is inward looking, there is a financial problems, there is less spending on defense. Now we are down to one aircraft carrier with its battleships in the Gulf – in the Arabian Gulf versus two battleships – two aircrafts carriers and battleship in the region. There are more talks about burden-sharing. We don’t mind that. Let the Chinese also foot the bill. We don’t mind that.

This month, the Chinese replaced United States as the number one oil importing country, and United States replaced Russia this month as the number one oil-producing country (thank ?) for fracking and shale gas and oil.

Also, we see financial problem in the United States, since most of the U.S. allies, especially in the GCC states – Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar – sovereign wealth funds is being invested in the UST bills and stocks and billions of U.S. dollars. For instance, most of the GCC states, including the Saudi Central Bank’s net foreign assets of $690 billion are thought to be denominated in dollars, much of them in U.S. Treasury bonds.

The unprecedented anger and chastising in Washington by Prince Turki Al-Faisal just a couple of days ago at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations – and I was there, and I heard it, and it was carried on many GCC newspapers and in the Arab world. For the first time in years, the dispute and differing with Washington from a GCC perspective is out in the open in a very clear manner. Adjective describing the U.S. policy in the Gulf, in the region and the Middle East in general, like weak, wavering, differing, naïve, unreliable have become the norm.

Just a couple of day ago, as I said, at the 22nd National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, a huge gathering at the conference – listened with – some of them shocked, some of them admired what – the pointed criticism and chastising by his Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal, the former intelligence chief – Saudi intelligence chief and former Saudi ambassador to the U.S. and the U.K. over the U.S. policy over a lot of issues. Prince Turki expressed doubt that Obama would succeed in what he called an open-arms approach – I am quoting – to Iran. Obama is doing this to the heir of the Saudis, even though the U.S. administration clearly is aware of the Iranian meddling and fomenting troubles and sectarianism in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Bahrain, thus undermining United States allies and their interests and, in the long run, U.S. interests as well.

Even though the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, tried to allay the fear of the Saudis and other GCC countries at a meeting with the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal in Paris last Monday, insisting that the, quote, “no deal with Iran was better than a bad deal,” assuring, quote, “I have great confidence that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia will continue to be the close and important friends and allies that we have been.”
But that, apparently, in my opinion, did not assuage the Saudis, and maybe, for a lesser extent, the other GCC countries, but I think now, at this stage, the Saudis are having the hawkish – the most hawkish and the most upfront position by any other GCC states regarding the United States policy vis-à-vis the Syrians and the mainly the Iranians now.

Not to be outdone, also, Prince Saud Al-Faisal canceled the Saudi speech at the United Nations General Assembly. That was a very clear message of the Saudi feeling that they have not – they haven’t been listened by their staunch ally, United States. That was a first for the Saudis, but the more poignant response by the Saudis that took everybody by surprise, as you – as you know by now is that they’re – Saudis standing down. The coveted seat that they worked hard to get over the last couple of years, to be a nonpermanent member for a couple of years at the United Nations Security Council to show their displeasure and to show they’re not satisfied with what’s going on.

Two minutes so, I have to – I haven’t said half what I have to say. (Laughter.) Anyway –

MR. WEHLEY (?): Q-and-A. Q-and-A – (inaudible) –

[00:16:14]

MR. AL SHAYJI: OK. I just want to elaborate on a few points. I think the relationship is now reaching a tipping point between the two sides. It is not at the stage of a complete – I’m keeping my last quote for the last paragraph, but it’s not at a critical stage of – between the GCC led by the Saudis and between the United States. The equation from the GCC viewpoint, at this stage, especially over Iran and Syria, is being viewed by the GCC countries, especially the countries that have invested a lot in the relationship with Washington and in seeing a new, different Gulf and Middle East is viewed at this stage as a zero-sum game, shutting out completely the GCC from consultation or taking their concerns and worries as a factor.

What we’d like to see is more holistic approach, not limiting the United States overture, just over nuclear issue, but also over all – the host of challenges and worries that we have about Iran regarding, as I said, the meddling, sectarianism, shenanigans and the host of other – interfering in Arab affairs.

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I just want to close by saying, the GCC would like to see a nuanced and holistic approach that addresses a gambit of issues and to be – and not to be limited to the nuclear program per se as the Americans, it seems, at the first stage, are indicating. But we got some assurances that the Americans are not going to lift the biting and crippling sections before Iran dismantles its nuclear program, not to stop enriching. And that is from Iranian perspective, and in my opinion, is a nonstarter.

If the Americans or the Europeans – P-5 plus one – would insist that not only stopping the enrichment of uranium, but also dismantling and submitting the 20 percent enriched uranium, I don’t think the Iranians are going to take that, and
this whole deal with all this euphoria about striking a deal and the Obama legacy of ending the animosity with Iran could really come to nothing.

I close by saying we would like to see in the GCC the new architecture that would emerge in the new Middle East and the Gulf – a more rational Iran that, we judge it by its deeds, not its words and nice smiles and charm offensive that could lead, probably, what is called in the Shia beliefs, “zawaj mut’ah,” a marriage of convenience between the Americans and the Iranians on the expense of the GCC countries. We’d like to see also a rational Iran that could live in peace with its neighbors, reconcile the disagreements and practices in a good, neighborly manner, not returning Iran through a grand bargain to the – to be the policeman of the Gulf. Maybe this is far-fetched, but there is talk that the Americans are pivoting towards Asia; they are bankrupt, they don’t have the will, the muscle, or the Obama doctrine that emphasized soft power and negotiations, diplomacy over hard power. So all these issues are really being now percolated in the region.

The widening trust deficit today between the GCC states and the U.S. over all these divergent issues is harming and hurting the relationship between the two partners. Clearly, there is a widening rift as we now see with Washington. I hope the pundits and analysts here in Washington don’t underestimate this friction. It needs to be, really, nurtured and be looked at from United States. We are the junior partners, yes. We don’t have many options, yes, but still, our mutual interest should be the guiding principle of this relationship, from GCC –

But let me end by pointing out, it hasn’t reached the tipping point that we are scared of yet – yet. It hasn’t reached the stage of separation, breaking up, getting divorced, let alone taking a second wife. We are not there yet, at least at this stage. But there is an urgent need, in my opinion, by the Americans and the GCC to be more receptive, more open-minded, more accommodating and to listen – especially from the American side – to their angry – (inaudible) – junior partners in the GCC countries, especially the Saudis. Thank you.

MR. FEHLEY (?): Thank you very much. Mehran. (Applause.)

MEHRAN KAMRAVA: Thank you. Let me start by thanking my good friend and colleague, Dr. Fred Wehrey for this invitation. It’s an honor and a pleasure being here.

My remit is to talk about Qatar and its foreign policy, and I think, in many ways, it’s befitting to talk about Qatar – it’s very symbolic to be the only person talking about Qatar in a panel where three others are talking about Saudi Arabia, because that’s precisely how Qatar sees itself, as a small state in between bigger powers.

Let me start out by just giving you a very brief history of Qatari foreign policy over the last couple of years, particularly starting, probably, with 2009, 2010 and then bringing it up to – up to here. You know that Qatar had a power
transition in 1995, and the Emir who came to power, Sheikh Hamad bin Qalifa al-Thani, was determined to come out of the Saudi shadow. And so Qatar embarked on a series of extremely aggressive diplomatic moves to ensure its – first and foremost, survival strategy, caught in a very difficult place between the unpredictable diplomatic moves to ensure its – first and foremost, survival strategy, caught in a very difficult place between the unpredictable Iran to the north and the troublesome Saudi Arabia to the south, as far as the Qatari is saw it.

And it also wanted to ensure that it doesn’t get gobbled up in the regional upheaval. And so initially, Qatar’s foreign policy was motivated by survival strategy – and it did – it embarked on a series of efforts to ensure that survival. And then it realized in relatively short order that it could take that strategy one step further and not just ensure its survival but indeed, project power and influence, that it could, in fact, become a consequential actor in regional developments.

And so we see, by the time Qatar enters into the 2000s, there are several key ingredients in its diplomatic toolbox that it continues to rely on in order to enhance its influence both within the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf region, but indeed, beyond – in the region – in the Middle East and the larger Middle East and, in fact, globally.

And so there are a couple of ingredients in its diplomatic toolbox up until 2010 that I think are quite important for us to keep in mind. First and foremost, Qatar embarks on a very aggressive branding campaign to ensure that everybody knows it’s – knows not only how to pronounce the name of the country but – or to point to it on a map, but also sees it as a consequential player in regional affairs.

And so, as you know, in 1996, Qatar launches Al Jazeera, and then it embarks on a number of showcase projects, beginning with inviting American universities like Northwestern, Cornell, Georgetown, Virginia Commonwealth, Texas A&M – it embarks on a very aggressive media campaign, advertising campaign. It makes sure that its national airline is world-class. It builds a world-class museum, and all of these, of course, culminate in the successful bid for the 2022 World Cup – soccer World Cup in 2022.

So first and foremost, there is this branding campaign. Reinforcing this is hyperactive diplomacy, with Qatar ensuring that it is present on the regional stage. It is involved in a number of initiatives regionally and globally. It is an – it is very active and a prolific mediator in regional conflicts, most notably in 2009 in Lebanon, and it becomes an incredibly active presence within the GCC, within the Arab League, and of course, within the U.N. and other international forums and beyond.

Reinforcing these two elements of hyperactive diplomacy and branding is Qatar’s extremely aggressive international investments. Qatar investment authority is not by any means the biggest sovereign wealth fund coming out of the Arabian Peninsula, but it is, by far, one of the most aggressive in the sense that it continues to buy and sell. It continues to buy and sell.
If you know ADIA, Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, they tend to be long-term investors, although they are a much larger sovereign wealth fund, they tend to be a much longer-term investor. QIA, Qatar Investment Authority, by contrast, is extremely aggressive and goes for showcase purchases, buys – my British friends often get upset when I say half of London is owned by the Qatars, and they still haven’t forgiven the Qatars for buying Harrods and the Shard and other big buildings in London.

So there is a very aggressive investment strategy, and all of this is reinforced by what Kuwait doesn’t have, which is an extremely focused leadership – a decision-making system that really, in many ways, is limited to no more than five people – the minister of energy that brings in the funds, the prime minister that is the head of investment and authority and invests the funds – there is the second wife of the Emir, Sheikha Mozah, that’s in charge of culture and inviting these universities and heads of the cultural issues of the – and then there is the heir apparent –basically, the second in command, whose official title was deputy emir, and there’s the CEO – there’s the Emir himself.

So you can think of Qatar the country as Qatar the corporation, and Qatar, Inc., of course, has these – it’s extremely agile. Only five people who make all the decisions, and it can – they can capitalize on opportunities and create opportunities, and so that’s Qatar up until 2010. And then, three things begin to happen, beginning in 2010, that now bring us to where we are today, which is at the threshold of transition. Three things happened.

First and foremost, the Arab Spring hits. Now, through its diplomatic toolbox, Qatar has been able, up until that point – has been able to project influence, project power. And it sees, unlike all the other GCC states – it sees the Arab Spring not as a threat, but indeed, as an opportunity that it can capitalize on in order to enhance its influence and to deepen its reach across the region and, in fact, beyond.

What happens, however – and we see this particularly in the early phases of the Egyptian revolution and in the early phases of the Libyan revolution with the Qatari flag being the first flag that goes up in Gaddafi’s compound when he falls, which is kind of interesting and ironic. But then, the Arab Spring evolves or, if you will, mutates into a bunch of unending civil wars that we see today.

So we’re in – insofar as the Arab Spring and Qatar’s involvement in the Arab Spring is concerned, in Egypt, in Syria, we – and in fact, even in Libya we see that Qatar’s position of influence is being either undermined or subject to tremendous strain and challenge in each of these three examples where, at one point, it seemed like Qatar was calling all the shots.

So that’s the first transition that occurred. A second transition is an actual leadership transition in the country itself, whereby Sheikh Khalifa, the ultimate balancer – the political animal to the nth degree – a careful politician that was
incredible in his astuteness and ability to balance out domestic challenges and international and regional challenges – all of these happen – there is a leadership transition, and he abdicates power a couple of months ago in favor his 33-year-old son. And the question, then, is, will Qatar be able to pursue the same kind of carefully calculated, aggressive hyperdiplomacy that it pursued under Sheikh Hamad? Will Sheikh Tamim, the current Emir, be the same astute political leader and diplomat in particular that his father was?

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And in many ways, that’s an unknown question, and I don’t think we really know the answer. Sheikh Tamim has a decidedly different style. The question is, does this different style translate into the substance of that area of diplomacy and Qatari foreign policy? I don’t think anybody can tell. I think what we do know is that insofar – if the father is any – is any case, we saw that it took the father a couple of years to put his stamp on Qatari domestic politics and foreign policy, and it might – it might take the current emir a couple of years, also, to make his mark on Qatari foreign policy and diplomacy.

A third transition is, of course, the Iran question. For 35 years, the GCC states have been able to capitalize on Iran’s tensions with the United States in order to position themselves and to enhance their positions and leverage in relation to the United States because of these tensions between Iran and the United States. Major billion-dollar purchases in weaponry – they have been able to leverage their position within the GCC, within – in order to bandwagon, to seek shelter in the comforting embrace of American security umbrella in order to do whatever it is they want to do, whether it is suppress domestic opposition or at – all the time, we see that the Iranian boogeyman has served as an extremely convenient excuse for the GCC to justify its domestic politics.

[00:31:45]

And Obama’s phone call to Rouhani, as we see, has thrown this calculation into utter confusion and utter panic, and what we are seeing out of the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait is utter panic matched only by Netanyahu’s panic, with all due respect. (Laughter.)

MR. : Not that much – (inaudible).

MR. KAMRAVA: Only matched by Netanyahu’s panic. I want to emphasize that. Now, this is actually part of the GCC’s foreign policy option, because what we see is that the GCC has pursued a foreign policy line – I was just given 20 minutes – thank you – (laughter) –

MR. : Added a zero. Nice.

MR. KAMRAVA: The GCC has pursued a foreign policy line that may best be described as bandwagoning, and that is when you seek shelter in the embrace of a potential threat against another threat. And so what the GCC has done –
so we see, for example, Bahrain has sought shelter in the embrace of Saudi Arabia against the Iranian threat. Saudi Arabia has sought shelter in the embrace of the United States against the Iranian threat. So you actually bandwagon.

Qatar, on the other hand, has pursued hedging, which comes from gambling, which is, you place one bet one way – one big bet one way and a bunch of smaller bets the opposite way. So Qatar has sought shelter in the embrace of American security umbrella, but at the same time, it has maintained warm, friendly, fraternal ties with Iran, with Hamas and with a whole bunch of other characters.

And this has enabled the Qatars to position themselves in a wonderful place where they can maintain open lines of communication with multiple actors, not all of whom, at any given point, may talk to each other. And this policy of hedging under the new Emir is likely to continue, and therefore, what we see coming out of Doha is nothing like the panic that we see coming out of Riyadh or Kuwait City or Manama. Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. WEHLEY (?): Thank you.

FAHAD NAZER (?): OK, Well, first of all, thank you, Fred, and thank you for inviting me; it’s a real honor to be speaking here today at Carnegie and to be among such distinguished company. I will focus mostly on Saudi foreign policy; however, before I do that, I think it’s important to provide a little bit of background, a little bit of context to explain where – how Saudi foreign policy is formulated. And there’s two elements – sort of factors, in particular, that I’d like to focus on, and I’m sure they’re not going to come as a surprise to anybody in this room, but they’re Islam and oil.

Everybody knows that Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the location of its two holiest sites. It’s not an exaggeration to say that Islam permeates every facet of Saudi life, and certainly, foreign policy is not immune to that as well. The Saudi – if one looks at the Saudi basic law of governance, which is the closest thing that Saudi Arabia has to a written constitution – in fact, in the very first article it states that the Qur’an and the Sunnah are actually the constitution of Saudi Arabia, and if that – if that doesn’t tell you how – doesn’t make it clear how important Islam is in – to Saudi Arabia, then I don’t think anything would. Article 23, likewise says that the state shall protect the Islamic creed, apply the Shariah and encourage good and discourage evil and undertake its duty regarding the propagation of Islam, or “dawa,” which also is an important fact. Another clause – I believe clause – or article 25 says, as the state shall nourish the aspiration of Arab and Muslim nations in solidarity and harmony and strengthen relations with friendly states. So that’s Islam.

The other factor, of course, is oil. Saudi Arabia remains to be the biggest exporter of oil and the biggest producer of crude oil in the world. For much of this year, its daily production has hovered around 10 million barrels a day. It has an
extra – spare capacity of 2.5 million barrels a day, which can it bring on the market on fairly short notice to make up for any disruptions in supply, and that by itself gives it quite a bit of leverage and makes it an important player in international affairs.

Going back to the basic law, there is also an interesting article – it’s article number 14 that relates to Saudi natural resources, and it says all natural resources that God has deposited underground, above ground, in territorial waters or within land and sea domains under the authority of the state, together with the revenues of these resources, shall be the property of the state.

So these two factors – its eminence in the Muslim world and its oil wealth have enabled Saudi Arabia to really – it’s been able to – it’s enabled it to be uniquely positioned to advance not only its own geostrategic interests in the world – and certainly in both the Arab and Muslim worlds, but it’s also been able to support some of its closest allies when they’ve needed support, when they’ve faced security threats both external as well as internal, and this same role has also – this eminence in both the Muslim and Arab worlds has allowed Saudi Arabia to often play a mediating role across the region to bring long-simmering and long-term conflicts to a peaceful resolution.

Now, over the years, I think that Saudi Arabia has embraced this leadership role. However, it does come with expectations. I mean, part of it – they realize that that role that is – that they’re in and that opportunity to advance their own interests and to help play – help resolve some of these regional conflicts, but also, there is an expectation among people in both the Arab and Muslim worlds, along with an expectation from Saudi people themselves that Saudi Arabia has a moral obligation to use its oil wealth and to use its eminence and eminent status in the Muslim world to not only come to the aid of fellow Arab and Muslim nations, but also to help bring – resolve some of these conflicts over the years.

To this very day, Saudi Arabia maintains that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the central conflict of the region, and unless and until that’s resolved, the Middle East will be prone to turmoil and radicalism. Saudi Arabia, for the most part, did not take part in the Arab-Israeli wars, with one exception: In 1948, there was a – (I believe ?) two Saudi companies fought as part of the Egyptian Army in southern Israel, but that’s the extent of actual fighting, for the most part. Saudi Arabia has used its oil wealth to strengthen some of the front-line states in Jordan, Egypt and Syria.

And of course, the – 1973 was a seminal moment when the war broke out and Saudi Arabia used what came to be termed by some as the oil weapon to – well, to pressure the United States and other countries that supported Israel. It didn’t quite work, but it certainly sent a signal to the rest of the world that Saudi Arabia has emerged not only as a big – an influential regional player but as a global player whose policies can affect the health and economic well-being of the entire world.
Saudi Arabia also supported Iraq in its eight-year war, devastating war with Iran. One can characterize that as a lesser of two evils. Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionaries made it very clear early on that they were not – they were not fans of the Arab monarchies, let’s put it that way, and also, of course, there was a lot of talk about exporting the revolution to the rest of the Gulf region, which understandably made Saudi Arabia and other states a little nervous.

Back to the mediation efforts, I think some of the most notable, maybe the most famous is the Lebanese civil war; the Saudis played a role in helping bring an end to that 15-year crisis in ’89, in Taif, when most of the parties involved were – met in Taif, and eventually that led to an agreement and the end – and an end of the conflict.

A more recent example is 2007, when Saudi Arabia actually tried to broker an agreement between Hamas and Fatah. And I’m just wondering here, does anyone remember where that agreement took place?

[00:41:56]

MR. : I remember.

MR. NAZER: It’s – Mecca is right. I heard that.

MR. : (Inaudible.)

MR. NAZER: Well, yeah. So that’s not a coincidence that Mecca was the location. I think that speaks volumes about – again about the role that Islam plays in Saudi foreign policy.

In 2002, of course, then-Crown Prince Abdullah presented the – what became known as the Abdullah peace initiative at the Arab League summit, which was adopted that year and presented once again in 2007 and adopted by the league, as well.

[00:42:36]

Now, having said all that, I think there is a bit of a consensus among observers of Saudi foreign policy, in particular, that there is a streak of pragmatism to Saudi foreign policy and realism that, while they do have a commitment to their fellow Arab and Muslim nations, ultimately and before anything else, they have a commitment to safeguard the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia itself and the security of its citizens; that, you know, the most dramatic example of that is 1990, when Iraq invades Kuwait; Saudi Arabia goes along with the U.S. plans, welcomes close to 500,000 U.S. troops to help expel the Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

And of course, after they had agreed to that decision, they also ensured that their Saudi religious authorities – that religious authorities OK’d it from a religious standpoint. And yes, I said after they had agreed to the decision, not before. So that’s something to keep in mind.
So fast forward to the Arab Spring. Everybody knows that obviously it began in – thank you – began in Tunisia. I think it’s fair to say that Saudi Arabia, most likely entire international community was caught a little off-guard. Tunisia is kind of – was like a proverbial earthquake that kind of lasted a couple of minutes but forever changed people’s expectations and beliefs in many things. However, you know, the Tunisian president was toppled, he ends up in exile in Saudi Arabia, where periodically you see his pictures pop up on Twitter. Just a couple weeks ago I saw a picture of him and a very young – assumed it was his child, with a skeleton behind them, the kind you would find at a – not a real skeleton, but the kind you would find in a chemistry or biology lab. I’m not sure what to make of that. I just thought it was something worth sharing.

MR. : (Inaudible) – Halloween, perhaps.

MR. NAZER: Maybe early Halloween plans, exactly.

[00:44:58]

So fast forward again. Egypt. Obviously, when the protests take place in Egypt, Saudi Arabia understandably gets nervous. President Mubarak was one of their most reliable allies over the years. He stood – certainly stood – was unequivocal in his support for Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. But much like the United States and other countries, ultimately when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians came out and made their feelings known, you know, nobody was able to save Mubarak.

And really I think Saudi Arabia adjusted eventually to that reality. President Morsi’s first trip abroad was to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia even provided some aid for him initially to bolster his regime. However, when that regime was toppled, it was not a surprise that Saudi Arabia was the first country to congratulate the new interim regime. Saudis know General Sisi very well, along with President Mansour, and so I think it’s fair to say they’re fairly comfortable with the people in charge now in Egypt.

[00:46:16]

Real quick – well, so now do I talk about Bahrain or Syria? I’m not sure.

MR. : Syria.

MR. NAZER: OK. So Syria – couple of weeks ago I wrote a piece for The New York Times where I said the more I read about Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Syria, the more it reminds me of its involvement in Yemen in the early ‘60s, I think. And there’s a parallel there, I think. Saudi Arabia views the conflict in Syria as a defining moment with repercussions for the long-term future of the region and the political trajectory of the region. Also it does seem to be a chance for Saudi Arabia to take a stand against, obviously, Iran, its main foe in the Middle East, along with Assad and get him out of the picture, and Hezbollah, which has obviously had significant and seems to be an increasingly significant
presence, not a good presence, not a very, you know, productive or constructive presence in Syria. And I think I’ll leave it at that for now, and hopefully I’ll address some of the other points during Q and A. Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. WEHREY: Thank you.

GREGORY GAUSE: Thanks. I’m going to try not to repeat what my colleagues have said, so I’ll speak for about 45 seconds here. (Laughter.)

MR. GAUSE: Knowing you, no.

MR. GAUSE: Yeah. I think that what I would like to do is trace out what I see as the major outlines of Saudi foreign policy in the last six or eight years and try to—through that, try to understand why they’ve placed so large a bet on the Syrian issue and then talk a little bit about how that leads into the current disquiet in the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

So I think around 2006, the Saudis basically adopted as their primary lens for viewing the politics of the region the necessity to, if possible—to contain and then, if possible, roll back Iranian influence in the Arab world. They saw an Iran in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq as expanding its power in the Arab world, something that predated the Iraqi invasion, of course, but the Iraqi invasion really brought home—the consequences of the Iraqi invasion brought home to the Saudis. They saw an Egypt that was sclerotic and inward-looking, a Syria that was allied with Iran, and thus, in a very uncharacteristic way, the Saudis felt that they were the only Arab power that could stand up to the Iranians, that had to take a stance to—in a balance-of-power game, to try to contain and, if possible, roll back Iranian influence.

[00:49:23]

I think the Saudis are always more comfortable being the second partner in foreign policy engagements in the region, and this was kind of uncharacteristic and somewhat uncomfortable for them to take a main leadership role in what I think became a new Middle East cold war, cold war because it wasn’t fought by armies across international borders, it was fought out in the domestic politics of weak states in the Arab world. And the direction of the politics of those weak states would determine the geopolitical contours of the region.

When the Saudis undertook this, they basically engaged in a number of efforts in these weak states in the Arab world to contain or roll back Iranian influence and failed in each one. They failed in Iraq, particularly in the 2010 elections, where their strong support for the Iraqiya list led to Iyad Allawi’s party winning a plurality of the seats in the Iraqi parliament, but the Iranians were able to outmaneuver them through their superior contacts within Iraqi politics, and the United States basically agreed to Nouri al-Maliki continuing as prime minister, a big loss for the Saudis.

The Saudis also strongly supported, in Lebanon, the March 14th alignment, which won the elections of 2005 and 2009, and yet the Saudis found that it was Hezbollah that continued to dictate politics in Lebanon.
You wonder why the Saudis are a little leery about democracy. Boy, they were committed to democracy in Iraq and Lebanon, and look what it got them. You can laugh. That was a joke. (Laughter.)

Palestine. The failure of the Mecca agreement, as Fahad pointed out, was a blow to the Saudi effort to entice Hamas away from an Iranian connection and bring it back with Fatah under a Saudi umbrella. Their off-and-on efforts to woo Syria away from its strong alliance with Iran all failed. About the only thing that the Saudis could claim as a victory in this was their campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, and even that was really kind of a side show of this cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. And then the Arab Spring hit and they were dealt more blows with the fall of the Mubarak regime, which was their closest regional ally in the Arab world, and the threat to the Bahraini regime. The Saudis have pushed back on both of those, obviously.

But the Arab Spring also presented the Saudis with their first real opportunity to roll back Iranian influence in the Arab world, and that was the uprising in Syria. They were cautious at first. Riyadh was very cautious at first. It’s not a regime that naturally supports uprisings. It was cautious at first in its approach to the Syrian question, but by the end of 2011, through a combination, I think, of the increasing seriousness of the revolt in Syria, combined with – and I think that this is not to be ignored, although I don’t think it’s the major impetus for Saudi policy in Syria – some bottom-up pressure from Saudi society, which was, I think, increasingly taken with the violence in Syria and looking to put a stop to it, and this was a largely sectarian feeling, obviously; I mean, Sunni Muslims in Syria being oppressed and Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia sympathizing with them.

That by the end of 2011, I think the Saudis were all-in in trying to remove the Assad regime from power. What they found and what the United States found over the subsequent two years, almost, now, is it was a much harder thing than everyone originally imagined. And I think that what has become increasingly clear in the last few months is that the Syrian issue has a much, much higher priority for Saudi Arabia than it does for the United States. This is one of the roots of the tension in the relationship. I don’t think that there’s a solution to this. I don’t think that this is something that can be talked out or differences can be split.

While it’s clear that the United States, at least in its declaratory policy, also would like to see Assad out of power, it’s also clear to me that it’s not willing to do anything to bring that about. And thus it just – I think this is just an issue over which the United States and the Saudis have a different sense of priorities. And it seems to me that we are going to see down the line some amount of tension between the two capitals on this issue because as the United States takes up an even less active role on the Syrian front, Saudi Arabia has already indicated, and I think even before the interview given by Prince Bandar this week, that it will no longer be constrained by an American veto on who it will support in the Syrian campaign.
The Saudis are kind of stuck here, frankly, all right? They don’t like the Muslim Brotherhood, and they don’t like al-Qaida, and they’re tired of the Free Syrian Army, which they don’t think is particularly effective. So they’re trying to put together, you know, local fighter groups into this Islamic army that got announced about a month ago that will not be al-Qaida, not be the Nusra front, not be the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham and will not be the Free Syrian Army. I think that they will tell the Americans that these guys are fine. I think there will be plenty of people in the United States who will say these guys are not fine. And I think that there will be some tension on that issue that is just going to be part of the relationship for some time.

This difference of priorities over the Syrian issue is of course part of the overall disquiet that Abdullah described so well about how the Saudis are viewing U.S. policy toward Iran. Now, as opposed to the Syrian issue, where I do see real differences, and as opposed to the Egyptian issue, where there are also real differences, although I think not as serious – I’m happy to expound on that in questions – I think that the Saudi disquiet and worry about the U.S. opening to Iran, if we want to call it that, is exaggerated. I think the fear there is exaggerated. I don’t think the United States is about to do some geopolitical deal with Iran. I don’t think that the United States is about to turn over the keys to Gulf security to Tehran. I mean, U.S. policy, if the – U.S. policy might not be particularly consistent on a whole lot of things, but it has been consistent on one thing. That is, it doesn’t want any power other than itself to be the dominant power in the Gulf region. And despite the changes in the world energy market, I don’t think that’s going to change anytime soon because the Gulf is still the essential element of the world energy market – a changing world energy market, undoubtedly, but the Gulf is still the essential element of that world energy market.

So the Saudis are worried. The Gulf states are worried – maybe not Qatar because it’s a good hedger, right – but the other Gulf states are worried. This worry is structural. It’s baked in the cake.

Mehran threw around a couple of international relations theory terms like “bandwagoning.” Now I’m going to throw around my international relations terms, right? The weaker side in a security alliance always fears two things. Entrapment: If the stronger party is bellicose toward the foe, the weaker party might be drawn into a war that it does not want to fight. And on the opposite pole, it fears abandonment. When the stronger party in the alliance is engaging in some way, shape or form with the foe, the weaker party believes its interests are going to be sold out, right? This is – this is structural. I think that one can look at the history of NATO in the same terms. I think the Western Europeans at various times in the history of the Cold War felt that the United States was either going to entrap them in a war with the Soviet Union or abandon them in its negotiations with the Soviet Union. This is – this is just a structural part of the relationship between the United States and the – and Saudi Arabia.

But I think that this element of the relationship is the one that’s most amenable to diplomatic solutions in that I think that the United States can tell the Saudis and consult with the Saudis more directly and lay out to the Saudis more – in
a more transparent way exactly what we’re after with the Iranians, exactly what our red lines are, exactly where the status the negotiation is in, and can provide some reassurance. So on that score, I actually think diplomacy can help.

I think that the core elements of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States remain OK. I think it’s a mistake to look at this relationship as one in which the two sides were always on the same page on regional security issues. They weren’t, right? Fred mentioned that at the outset, right, and the – and the most well-known incidents of difference are I think clear in everybody’s mind.

So what are those core elements? Well, they revolve around Gulf security and thus mil-mil cooperation. They revolve in the post-9/11 world even more than before on intelligence cooperation against radical Islamist elements, right? I don’t see any sign that that is in decline, although that would be an indicator of how serious the Saudis are. Military sales and security training – still there. And oil, right?

And I’ll end on this note. The oil market is changing, but as Fahd mentioned, Saudi Arabia is still the swing producer, still the swing producer. It’s still the largest exporter of oil in the world. And I just cannot imagine any American government not wanting to have a good relationship with the world’s swing producer of oil, the largest exporter of oil in the world.

We will see what happens over time. We are just at the beginning of these changes in the world energy market. But I don’t see any immediate changes that would lessen the importance of Saudi Arabia to the United States and the world economy.

[01:00:59]

So I don’t want to say that everything’s great. I think Syria and Egypt will be serious issues of disagreement between the two parties in the coming year, maybe two years. But I also do not see this point, as Abdullah said, as a point of divorce. This is not a muta marriage; this is a Catholic marriage. (Laughter.) And I don’t – and I don’t see an annulment on the – on the – (laughter) – on the horizon any time soon. Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. WHEREY: Well, thank you all for the excellent analysis. We’ll turn it over to questions now. Reminder, please do ask a question. And in the interests of time, keep it focused. And we’ll take three at a time, please.

Sir?

[01:01:41]

Q: Thank you. Ali al-Alyami (ph), from the Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia. I never thought I would agree with Gregory Gause in anything, but I agree with him on one point this afternoon, and that is, even
if we not import one drop of oil from the Middle East, from the Gulf, we will never let anybody to control that area. That we agree on.

Question to you, Gregory, is King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia – (inaudible) – he’s very sick; Saud al-Faisal, who is the foreign minister, has disease that he can barely walk; the crown prince is very sick, he has been out of the country since he became crown prince six times for treatment. And you continue to talk about the stability of this regime, and it is not fragile. First of all, how do you – how do you base your continued unbelievable predictions?

Fahad, 60 percent of the Saudi people are below 25 years of age, 40 percent are below 13 years of age. You mention that the Quran is the constitution of the country and the Shariah as the law and all of these things. These people have spent more time watching TV, working on Twitter and Facebook. They never go to mosque. They don’t care about Islam or Shariah. How do you see the impact of this explosive young people? Most of them are unemployed, disconnected of their past and see no future for them.

MR. WHEREY: OK. David.

Q: Hi. My name David Weinberg. I’m a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies on Gulf issues. This question is for Dr. Kamrava, but if any of you have something to add on it, please feel free to jump in.

Since you mentioned the leadership transition in Qatar, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about that. In particular, do you feel like there is persuasive evidence about why Sheikh Hamad decided to abdicate when he did? And what role do you see him playing today? Thank you.

Q: Hi. My name is Will Brod (ph). I work on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. I also have a question for Dr. Kamrava. I used to live in Ahor (ph) actually last year. And so my question is, kind of on top of the previous question, you know, Sheikh Jassim is no longer in the picture. You know, with his departure – and I’m also curious as to what Sheikha Mozah’s role will be in the future. You know, how do you see – you know, how will those changing roles affect Qatar and its relationship with the United States?

MR. WHEREY: OK. That’s three, so Greg, do you want to take your question?

MR. GAUSE: Oh, sure.
I’m glad we agree on something. The stability of the regime, you know, so far, I’ve been right, and everybody who has predicted the downfall of this regime has been wrong. And so I’m running a hot streak. I’ll continue – I’ll continue to ride that streak.

I have written and do think that if there is a threat to this regime, it will begin with splits at the top, right, and thus I do identify the generational change at the leadership level as an extremely critical point for the regime. This – when leadership finally does pass to the third generation of the family, there is no template, there is no precedent, the institution that was set up to King Abdullah to manage this is untested and has not been activated to the extent that one would have thought when it was rolled out in the two crown prince appointments that were made subsequent to the establishment of the Allegiance Council.

So I do think that family politics are extremely important for the stability of the regime. I also think family politics are the thing that outsiders can least intelligently comment upon because we don’t know. I mean, these things are held in – very close to the vest by the regime. If this generational shift at the top occurs at a time when there are other crises going on, perhaps fiscal crises, if the price of oil falls, or regional crises, I think that that would increase the chances of instability within the kingdom. But until that point comes, I actually think that they’re in pretty good shape.

MR. NAZER: Well, regarding your question, Ali (sp), obviously, everyone is aware that Saudi population is predominantly young, and I think there is some awareness at the top of the Saudi government that the needs of the population are changing, the political culture is changing I think over the years. I mean, all one has to do is pick up a newspaper, Saturday newspaper, from today and compare the headlines to what was in the papers 10 years ago, and you’ll notice that the issues that were once taboo are no longer taboo. I mean, there is an awareness that there is a need for educational reform. There is a need to strengthen the role of women in Saudi society; I think that’s in the papers every day at this point.

And again, if you – there is a perception among some that Saudi Arabia is kind of stuck in this bygone age when nothing ever happens domestically. I not sure that I agree with that – with that picture. I think that if one looks, again, over an extended period of time, there have been some reforms that are – that have been implemented that I think are worth noting. And they do indicate an awareness that the needs of the society are changing.

For one thing, there were some national municipal elections that took place in 2005 and then again a couple of years ago. There’s another round scheduled in 2014, I believe. And granted, the powers of the municipal councils is not great. However, that was still the first, you know, exercise or experience that Saudis have had with democracy really ever. And that – I don’t think that should be dismissed because it wasn’t that long ago that the notion of elections and democracy was shot down, was a nonstarter in Saudi Arabia. That’s no longer the case. Not only do you have – did you have municipal elections, there are elections in chambers of commerce, in various guilds.
Another notable move I thought was the periodic national dialogue conferences that allowed Saudis from very – almost opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum to sit together and talk about the various challenges confronting Saudi Arabia. Again, that’s new. I think that’s a positive development because, again, it shows that there is an awareness that there are issues and there are challenges that need to be discussed and moving forward with some input from, you know, the people at large. The Shura Council was initially composed of 60 members, I believe, when it was first imposed in ’92, ’93; it’s 150 now and includes 30 women.

So there is movement. It’s gradual. And I think that given what’s transpired over the past couple years in the Arab Spring states, I think that the push for gradual reform has – will only – you know, people who have pushed for gradual reforms have had their fears I think – their fears turned out to be warranted because we’ve seen what happens when wholesale changes happen, you know, overnight; it obviously has not been a very seamless transition in any of these countries. So I think the advocates of reform in Saudi Arabia will continue to push for incremental, gradual reforms that over the years I think will make a difference.

MR. KAMRAVA: Thank you. On the question of reasons for leadership transition in Qatar, similar to Saudi Arabia, as Greg mentioned, the science of Qatarology is at best kind of educated guess. And let me give you my educated guess. We really don’t know precisely what goes on within any of these ruling families. And of course, the Qatari ruling family, the al-Thanis, are no exception.

Over the last couple of years Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa all of a sudden lost an awful lot of weight, and his complexion started changing. And he had – earlier had a kidney transplant. And the assumption was that he was extremely ill, and that due to ill health, he had been looking for an opportune time to abdicate power and – in favor of his son. But then the Arab Spring hit, and he had to stay the course or at least saw that the time wasn’t right. That I think is the best educated guess.

But at the same time one thing to keep in mind is that it is extremely typical of Sheikh Hamad to have gone out with a big bang, to – again, this is part of branding, I think. And in many ways, it befits its character, this kind of thirst for the limelight.

And what’s he doing? Actually, one high-ranking diplomat told me recently that he was cited in the Maldives, and there were pictures of him in the local papers at the horse races in Paris. He’s enjoying retirement. He’s an extremely wealthy man, and he’s enjoying retirement.

What role does he have now? Officially, he’s the father emir. That’s his official title. And – but what he has done is not be a backseat driver. He has actually completely departed from the scene so that Tamim doesn’t have to feel that he
needs to come out of his father’s overwhelming, overpowering shadow. And so in many ways he has completely departed from the scene.

And this is in many ways tied to the second question with the departure – you mention Jassim; I believe you meant Hamad bin Jassim, the former foreign minister and prime minister, HBJ, Hamad bin Jassim.

[01:14:14]

What role for Sheikha Mozah? Sheikha Mozah has also – Sheikha Mozah is the second wife of the former emir whose title was the official consort of the emir, an extremely powerful woman and a very notable figure, not just in Qatar but indeed in the Middle East. She still continues to be in charge of cultural endeavors, cultural activities. She still heads Qatar Foundation, which is the overall umbrella that invites American universities. Couple of years ago, actually about four years ago, in a meeting, Sheikha Mozah said, I’m the only queen in the world who has a nine-to-five job, and like everybody else, I deserve the right to retire. And people in the room all looked at each other and though, what does she mean? She still hasn’t retired. There are far too many initiatives that she’s interested and excited about. But I would not be surprised if, again, that’s another natural retirement due to just simple wanting to take a back seat.

Does this affect relations with the United States? I think not. Pretty much along the same lines, Qatar’s relationship with the United States are anchored in very deep military cooperation, economically. ExxonMobil alone has $20 billion worth of investments in the country and that’s just one company. And so there are military aspects to the cooperation. There are economic aspects and there are, most importantly, cultural aspects in terms of American branch campuses.

Up until a couple of years ago there was the Tribeca film festival. And that was a little politically incorrect so they changed it to the Doha Film Festival instead of Tribeca because it was too American. But still, the American cultural content in the country is extremely high. And so these aspects of the relationship are not going to change anytime in the near future.

[01:16:23]

MR. WEHREY: OK, thank you.

Yes, Barbara?

Q: Barbara Bodine, Princeton University. You’ve – let me just make it a very simple question: Could you talk about the intra-GCC politics as it affects the broader Middle East? And I’m thinking primarily the Saudi-Qatari rivalry, competition. And I’ve noticed that nobody has mentioned the Emirates, who have a very large stake in the Iranian relationship and are playing a larger role, although certainly not at the level of the two major players.
Q: Munar Khonei (ph), Middle East News Agency, Egypt. Sorry. Munar Khonei (ph), Middle East News Agency, Egypt. My question is for Mr. Kamrava for Qatar. Do you think that Qatar could seize the ongoing Saudi-U.S. tensions now to play, quote, unquote, a “substitute” ally to the U.S.? Of course it will not go to the extent like Saudi Arabia, but could be a substitute ally in the region for the United States?

The second question is for Mr. Gregory. It’s about this U.S.-Saudi tension, don’t you think that it is now the tension, the ongoing one now, it is an open one and it is more flagrant, you see, because it takes some form that it didn’t happen before. So don’t you think that it is more difficult – this tension is more difficult than the ones that happened maybe 20 years ago? Thank you.

MR. WEHREY: OK.

Yes, sir. Yeah.

Q: Yeah, a question about Qatar also. Qatar and Iran, as Barbara said, traditionally there is rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Can Qatar play this card and improve relations with Iran at the expense of Saudi Arabia?

Second question anybody would like to comment on. Turkey – in Turkish media they report that GCC states are likely to try to build relations with Turkey instead of – since U.S. walked away from them, so Turkey – Turkey is happy with this, that it might be winner. Your comments, thank you.

MR. WEHREY: OK, thank you.

Who would like to take the intra-GCC –

MR. Abdullah.

MR. WEHREY: Yes.
MR. AL SHAYJI: Well, I think after the – a few years back on the Saudi Arabia – Saudi Arabia and Qatar reconciled over their fragmentation – I mean, the Saudis were interested in – and I knew even they hand-picked a Qatars’ editor in chief for a newspaper pointedly targeting Saudi Arabia – it’s like al-Hayat or a newspaper, but Al Jazeera newspaper – in order to continue on the rivalry along with Al Jazeera network. But it seems that there has been a reconciliation, and since probably 40 years ago we have not witnessed in the GCC countries much of that rivalry. It has died down. It has not been as much as it used to be.

Now, in the GCC there has been always – my theory and my approach, we don’t see eye-to-eye regarding security issues, like northern Gulf states always looked at Iraq as the menacing threat, mainly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. We did not look at Iran. That was before this nuclear issue and the meddling and the shenanigans of Iran.

Well, the southern Gulf states were more scared of Iran and they looked – they did not share our – the GCC – the Kuwaiti-Saudi excess fear of Iraq because of that all GCC countries opened their embassies in Baghdad while the Kuwaitis and the Saudis did not open their embassies up before Saddam Hussein was toppled. So that gives you an indication of not seeing eye to eye in the GCC regarding security, but now with the Iranian issue and with the U.S. wavering, I think there should be or there would be more coordination.

So I do not subscribe to the idea that there is a rivalry now between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The new emir has to be tested. There is a lot of rumors and talks in the region and in the Arab world about how and why the father abdicated to his son, but we have not seen much of the father or of the prime minister. Where have they gone? They did not have – they don’t have any more roles to play. Qatar has been now, in our opinion, more aligning itself with the larger GCC states, mainly Saudi Arabia. We have not seen a clear Qatari position regarding diverging in its approach with other GCCs.

So I would say, regarding also the UAE – I know somebody raised the issue of the United Arab Emirates – maybe Qatar only defers with the other GCC states, mainly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and UAE in particular, over the Muslim Brotherhood issue. Al Jazeera is still bombarding, on a daily basis – and I follow it on a daily basis in Kuwait and the region. The headlines news for 20 minutes every day, every news bulletin, especially the major news bulletins in the evening, dedicated to Egypt, and just trying to hammer out and to undermine, it seems, the military ruling elites that are running Egypt.

So in that regard I see a clear divergence from what the Qatari emphasis on the Egyptian – Muslim Brotherhood and other Muslim Brotherhood elements in Tunisia and not merely in Egypt. United Arab Emirates is leading the front in the counter-Muslim Brotherhood efforts. The GCC – the four GCC – or the three GCC countries – minus Qatar; Qatar did not contribute – after the United States threatened to withhold its military aid to Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and UAE donated or had a financial aid package to Egypt exceeding $12 billion as retaliation against the United States, it seems. Telling the Americans, if you want to cut off aid, OK, we’re going to step in and we’ll do that.

[01:23:51]
So I think we do not have – to summarize – much rivalry now. It’s dying down, especially between the Qatars and the Saudis. And the only fragment, or the only disagreement, or not seeing eye-to-eye in the GCC is between Qatar – between Qatar itself stands out regarding its embracing, in a way, the Muslim Brotherhood, although it’s not at official level, but at least Al Jazeera is an indication of the way the Qatari thinking about that issue. Thank you.

MR. WEHREY: What about Turkey’s role?

MR. AL SHAYJI: Turkey, I think – Turkey, China, India, I mean, it’s premature. And I agree with Greg. It’s premature to talk about who’s going to take over or replace United States. But Turkey presents itself as a successful model with the soft power, successful mixing Islam and democracy in a very moderate way. It could be an example of – plus, it’s a Sunni power in that part of the world. It could be counterbalancing in the future.

[01:25:06]

It’s an option that has not been used, but it’s an option that could be utilized by the GCC states if the Saudis want to, you know, up the ante with the Americans over the friction that’s now taking place. The Saudis could, you know, go on to have – but remember that Turkey is a member of NATO, and Turkey, its policies are more aligned with the United States than anybody else.

MR. WEHREY: OK.

MR. NAZER: Fred, if I could just –

MR. WEHREY: Real quick. Yep.

MR. NAZER: Yeah. Just regarding Turkey, I think it’s only natural for Saudi Arabia to cultivate its relations with a neighboring country, certainly within the Muslim world, and strengthen their relations. I became aware recently that the Organization of the Islamic Conference, actually its presidency, is going to be taken over by Saudi Arabia I believe either the end of December or January, and –

MR. GAUSE: Unless they decide to refuse that too. (Laughter.)

MR. NAZER: There is always that, yeah, which would make things interesting.

MR. AL SHAYJI: Talking about Qatar maybe take over? (Laughter.)

MR. NAZER: And so the organization itself has apparently appealed to the U.N. in a bid to strengthen some of its institutions, including in conflict resolution election observance and observation.
And so that tells me that perhaps, going back to this idea, what other alternatives are there, and so it’s – I don’t think anyone will replace the United States. The United States has established this – you know, it’s an infrastructure over many years. It’s demonstrated its ability to project its power. It’s been tested and proven in the Gulf War. So I don’t think there’s an alternative from the Saudi perspective.

However, that doesn’t just – that doesn’t rule out the fact that they do seem to be strengthening their relations, and maybe it’s going through something like the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which has 57 members and does include Turkey, obviously, Indonesia and Egypt and Jordan and a bunch of other countries with whom Saudi Arabia has had friendly relations for a year – for many years. I don’t – ultimately I don’t think anyone will replace the U.S., but it’s one possibility.

Q: Hello. My name is Greg Aftandilian with the Center for National Policy. My question is for Greg Gause about the Saudi end game in Syria. The United States seems to be very concerned about al-Qaeda elements in Syria and the collapse of the Syrian state and, you know, saying it wants a political solution. But what is the Saudi end game? You talked about favoring various Islamist groups within the rebel camp. Do they want those groups to ultimately succeed in capturing Damascus, or what is their plan? Thank you.

Q: Hi, I’m Michael Payne from Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain. So throughout the panel I know we heard a lot of discussion of how Iran is sort of the threat to the Gulf in a lot of the Gulf’s relations vis-à-vis Iran, but however, in the case of Bahrain, I think you see the monarchy there using sort of the specter of Iran in order to put down the legitimate democratic movements and repress their people within the country, as well as Saudi Arabia using the same sort of threat to move into Bahrain and put down that same protest movement, as well as put down a few groups within the eastern provinces as well.

Q: OK. Yes, right there in the middle.

Q: Hi, I’m Michael Payne from Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain. So throughout the panel I know we heard a lot of discussion of how Iran is sort of the threat to the Gulf in a lot of the Gulf’s relations vis-à-vis Iran, but however, in the case of Bahrain, I think you see the monarchy there using sort of the specter of Iran in order to put down the legitimate democratic movements and repress their people within the country, as well as Saudi Arabia using the same sort of threat to move into Bahrain and put down that same protest movement, as well as put down a few groups within the eastern provinces as well.
So I was wondering if you all could maybe speak a little bit more about sort of the – that type of action that’s been going on in the Gulf countries that – within the Saudi statements recently they did list the U.S. not supporting Saudi intervention in Bahrain as one of their grievances. So if you guys could speak more about that, that would be great.

MR. WEHREY: Thank you.

Q: Since we’re doing regional powers with sectarian fault lines, a question on Iraq. Obviously over the last couple of years, since the sort of Saudi defeat in 2010 with Arpiyah (ph), we’ve seen some sort of gradual diplomatic warming between some of the GCC countries, most notably Kuwait but a little bit with the Saudis on Iraq. With elections coming up next year, what would we expect from GCC countries, especially the Saudis? And is that an opportunity for renewed cooperation perhaps with the U.S. in terms of the – you know, the future of the country? Thank you.

MR. WEHREY: OK. Abdullah, you have to leave soon, so do you want to take one of those questions?

MR. AL SHAYJI: Yeah, regarding Iraq, I think the Saudi position is the most clear position, anti the regime, now the government of Maliki in Iraq. The Saudis have been upfront about it, and therefore the other Gulf countries, they have opened their embassies. They have – especially Kuwait has reconciled mostly with the – with Iraq. But that is really something that is of concern for us while the Saudis are still holding out any rapprochement or any reconciliation with Iraq because they feel that Iran is still dominating Iraq and Iraq is doing the Iranian bidding in the region, and they see it in Syria particular, or the sectarianism also rising to levels that could engulf the whole region in sectarianism, the meddling of the Iranians.

[01:31:32]

So I do not foresee – maybe Greg could answer this question also, could jump in, but I do not foresee, even after the elections that will take place next year in parliamentary elections in Iraq – that is now drifting towards another civil war, another sectarian war – and with the shenanigans of Iran and the tension, the sectarian tension, any rapprochement or any détente between the Saudis and the Iraqis, and for – I do not foresee the Saudi ambassador heading to Baghdad anytime soon.

I don’t remember the other questions.

MR. WEHREY: That’s helpful, yeah.

Greg, did you want to take the end state question?

MR. GAUSE: Yeah, sure. I’d be happy to. Let me respond first, though, to Munar’s (ph) question about the open tension that we didn’t get to on the last one.
I can understand why people think that this is a different episode between Saudi Arabia and the United States, but my – I come down on the side that says it’s not – it’s not different in kind from past episodes. I do think that the more open media environment both the Arab world and the increased media focus in the United States on the Gulf region and on the Middle East as a whole has led – has made it seem like it’s more important because we’re hearing more about it, you know?

I mean, 10 years ago there was no Al-Monitor that was translating Khalid Al-Dakhil’s editorial op-eds in Hayat so people could read them in English. You know, I just think that we’re hearing more from each other about this, both because the media environment in the region is a bit more open than it has been in the past, and because we’re a bit more focused. You know, 10 years ago there was no Sada to put in a plug for Carnegie, right, that was – that was doing kind of up-to-date analysis of what was going on in the region.

[01:33:35]

I don’t think it’s more flagrant. I think – I think it’s of a piece with past crises. In fact, I think it’s less severe than the oil embargo crisis. I think it’s less severe from the American side on the post-911 situation. I think it’s – I think it’s important but manageable. I’ll say that.

What’s the Saudi end game in Syria? What’s anybody’s end game in Syria? I don’t know, Greg. I think that their end game is get rid of Bashar al-Assad and then we’ll straighten it out. I don’t – I’m not really sure that there is a well-thought-out end game for any of the outside players in Syria, with the exception of Iran, whose end game is the preservation of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. And so I got nothing on that one, but I don’t really think that there’s many people in Saudi Arabia who have much on that either. I’d be happy to be contradicted by the panelists.

I just want to say one more thing about Bahrain. I think that’s an excellent point. The Bassiouni report was very clear on the indigenous nature of the popular mobilization in Bahrain. I don’t think anybody who looks at Bahraini politics would question that.

I think that the Saudi approach to Bahrain is through two prisms, and one is the Iran prism, without a doubt, but the other is the monarch prism, all right? The Saudis were very, very clear that they were not going to – you know, they were going to do everything they could to prevent any monarchy from going down in the Arab Spring. And I think that – you know, so Bahrain was a “twofer,” right? If there were regime change in Bahrain, I think that it’s possible that a new Bahraini government, democratically elected, might look to – would certainly look to have more normal relations with Iran, which would upset the Saudis enough, but also the fall of a monarchy, especially one, you know, 12 miles – 12 kilometers off their shore was not something that the Saudis were willing to tolerate.

[01:35:56]

MR. WEHREY: OK. Any other final –
MR. NAZER: Yeah. Just the – regarding the end game in Syria for Saudi Arabia, I mean, like Dr. Gause said, obviously they want Assad out. The Saudi foreign minister has described Assad’s onslaught against civilians in Syria as a genocide. He even said that considering the presence of Hezbollah and Iranian elements in Syria, that Syria should be considered under occupation. These are obviously very strong terms.

Personally, I mean, I’ve had the misfortune of watching way too many videos coming out of Syria. They come out on a daily basis. The atrocities are absolutely mind-boggling and numbing. They make you question, to be honest, the inherent goodness of people at some point. And I think what the Saudis are looking at is they look at the long term and they just – I don’t think they can picture a scenario where they can overlook the – again, the atrocities that have taken place over the past couple of years where they can suddenly just throw in a new page with Assad after all that’s happened. Again, the estimates are over a hundred-thousand dead. That’s at this point.

So for regimes, or people who are saying that – they’re expressing concern about Islamist militants taking over in Syria, and that’s understandably so. Obviously the legacy of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in places such as Iraq, Yemen, even Somalia is atrocious. However, the legacy that Assad has left over the past couple of years is not any better.

From the Saudi perspective and from the perspective of many certainly Sunnis in the region, when they hear the people saying that, you know, well, the alternative might be worse, I think that kind of a question gives them pause because, again, as Arab Sunnis across the region, I don’t think they can see a worse alternative. What could possibly be worse than what’s happening right now? So I think they’re looking at it from a very different perspective.

MR. WEHREY: Great.

Well, we’ve come to the end of our pane, and I wanted to thank our panelists for what I think was a very incisive and illuminating diagnosis really of a troubled but perhaps solid marriage. I found it illuminating and somewhat therapeutic too to hear all this. And I wanted to also – well, first, please join me in thanking our panel. (Applause.)

And I also want to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of our staff and junior fellow who were manning the microphones: Nadia Scott (sp), David and Tiffany (sp). Please join me in thanking them for their help. (Applause.) And thank you all for coming and for the interesting discussion. Thanks.

(END)