



A New U.S. Approach to Gulf Security

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SUMMARY

U.S. relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf are strained by divergent policies toward a changing Middle East, the Gulf countries' fears of being abandoned by the United States, and unprecedented intra-Gulf tensions. Washington has attempted to reassure Gulf partners of the strength of the security alliance while calling for liberalizing reforms. Increasingly, however, the Gulf states' domestic policies have put them at odds with these calls. Contrary to some assumptions, the goals of reassurance and reform need not contradict one another: underscoring the urgency of much-needed institutional changes reinforces the U.S. commitment to durable regional security. The United States must focus more on promoting political and security sector reforms in the Gulf that are critical to long-term regional stability by better integrating its use of military and diplomatic tools.

Recommendations for Washington

Use foreign military sales (FMS) more deliberately and selectively to both build the defense capacity of Gulf states and promote domestic reform. U.S. military sales reinforce U.S. security commitments to the Gulf on threats of mutual concern. But withholding military items, particularly those used in internal repression and high-value items that offer prestige to Gulf regimes, can also signal U.S. concern about Gulf domestic policies and potentially compel Gulf regimes to enact specific reforms.

Reinforce the focus on political and security sector reform in International Military Education and Training activities. The curriculum for foreign officers at U.S. staff colleges should focus more on the linkage between institutional and political reforms and durable security.

Arrange for a high-level speech that articulates a comprehensive, positive vision for the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council alliance. The U.S. president should deliver a speech reaffirming U.S. commitment to Gulf regional alliances and emphasizing the importance of meaningful political reform.

Make Bahrain the focus of U.S. reform promotion in the Gulf. The U.S. administration should empower government and opposition moderates to reconcile, based on a road map of political and institutional reforms. If the situation deteriorates, Washington should prepare a contingency plan for moving the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters out of Bahrain.

A STRAINED PARTNERSHIP

Dramatic shifts in the Middle East environment have exposed sharp differences between Washington and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. There is a growing sense in Gulf capitals that the United States is a power in retreat that is ignoring the interests of its steadfast partners, if not blithely betraying them. Led by Saudi Arabia, the regimes of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have criticized the United States for what they see as a naive capitulation to Iranian nuclear ambitions in ongoing negotiations, an underestimation of the Muslim Brotherhood's regional threat, and a dangerous hesitation to intervene in Syria. Washington's announcement of a strategic "pivot" to Asia and its near-complete withdrawals of military forces from Iraq and Afghanistan only add to the alarm.

Gulf fears of U.S. abandonment are not new—they are deeply etched into the structure of the relationship. As smaller states dependent on a more powerful patron, GCC members have always worried that Washington will abandon them to more predatory neighbors or entrap them in a regional war of America's making.

What is new about the recent alarmism is both the decibel level and the severity of the Gulf response. Gulf states have undertaken an increasingly activist and assertive foreign policy across the region. In some cases, these policies have opposed or even undercut U.S. interests. Bankrolling the Egyptian military's ejection of the government of Mohamed Morsi and funding radical Salafi opposition groups in Syria are the most significant examples. Saudi Arabia has called for a more muscular Gulf defense policy, to include a "united military command" of GCC forces, and it has issued veiled threats to the United States about seeking military partners elsewhere.

Meanwhile, in response to the potential for popular mobilization that was sparked by the Arab uprisings in 2011, Gulf states increased internal repression. As a result, their domestic policies are more frequently at odds with the U.S. administration's call for greater reform and human rights in the region. Often in coordination with each other, the GCC states have muzzled outspoken clerical figures, imprisoned activists, deported expatriates, and enacted draconian censorship laws. The small but encouraging steps toward liberalization that Gulf regimes have taken in the last decade have all but halted—and in many cases regressed.

There are disturbing signs of this across the Gulf, but events in the kingdom of Bahrain epitomize the trend. It is in Bahrain where U.S. policy faces the starkest challenge. A worsening cycle of protests and repression has gripped the kingdom since 2011. Both sides in the conflict—the Sunni royal family and a constellation of opposition activists and organizations—have pursued escalatory tactics and a winner-take-all strategy, resulting in mutual recriminations and missed opportunities for compromise. Hardliners within the royal family appear to be comforted by a "new normal" in U.S. policy that absolves them from making substantive gestures to the opposition. The mainstream Shia opposition al-Wefaq has suffered from a maximalist negotiating posture that is the product, in part, of a rejectionist, militant trend in the opposition's ranks.

THE CURRENT U.S. APPROACH

Since the fall of 2013, a principal focus of U.S. strategy has been to reaffirm to Gulf states the durability of American support by emphasizing that the United States shares Gulf concerns on regional threats,

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particularly Iran, and will provide security accordingly. More tangibly, the United States has continued its scheduled arms deliveries to the Gulf (including a recent \$11 billion package), announced plans for expanding the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, and increased the tempo of arms sales to the region under its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program over the past six years. Although the origins of much of this activity predate the current round of Gulf-U.S. discord, the efforts nonetheless serve to reinforce Washington's message of reassurance.

Senior U.S. officials have publicly professed continued support for political reform in the Gulf. But in practice, the reality—at least from the outside—appears quite different. This is especially true in light of the popular perception that the U.S. administration under President Barack Obama is scaling back its democracy promotion programs in the Middle East, many of which, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), have faced intense GCC opposition since the start of the Arab uprisings.

As Obama prepares for a trip to Saudi Arabia at the end of March 2014, Washington should take a strong stance in support of its continued interests in the region and the expectation that Gulf leaders will enact meaningful reforms. The United States needs to revise its reassurance strategy in the Gulf and ensure that it includes an effort to convince its allies that reform—of political institutions, the security sector, and the rights and liberties afforded citizens—will ultimately contribute to the U.S. and Gulf vital interest in long-term stability.

REAFFIRM TIES, USE MORE EFFECTIVE LEVERAGE ON REFORM

The U.S. administration should develop a proactive strategy that urges Gulf states to undertake more substantial internal reforms to complement the efforts already under way to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to the external defense of these states. U.S. policymakers should recognize how urging reform and reaffirming security commitments are mutually reinforcing, rather than mutually exclusive objectives.

By urging reform, the United States can communicate to its allies that while it cares about state security, it also believes that the political status quo in the region is increasingly unsustainable. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel made this link between top-down reform and greater state strength at the Manama Dialogue on Gulf security in December 2013, asserting that “stability and political reform are necessary partners.” Indeed, in the years since the Arab Spring's dramatic 2011 debut, the U.S. security establishment has begun to recognize how gradual domestic reform in the GCC states can reduce the risks of political instability that challenge core U.S. interests, such as energy and counterterrorism.

To move beyond its public utterances, the United States needs a more holistic strategy that synchronizes different tools of U.S. foreign policy, from security to diplomacy. It should use existing levers in a more integrated way to advance political and institutional reform in the context of strategic reassurances.

To do so, the United States must recognize and capitalize on its many forms of leverage, primarily in the area of security. Despite Gulf states' calls for more military self-sufficiency, GCC military forces remain dependent

on the United States for vital support in command and control, logistics, and intelligence. Added to this, political differences and mutual distrust have precluded the GCC from evolving into a real collective defense organization. At the end of the day, the United States is still the only superpower in town; no other external power—Russia, China, NATO, or India—is capable of filling or willing to fill America’s role.

This is true even in environments such as Bahrain, where anti-Americanism (in the media and in parliament, for example) is being used by Sunni hardliners to deter Western and U.S. efforts urging more inclusionary policies toward the country’s opposition. Here, Washington has already used its leverage to a degree. The United States paused all foreign military sales to Bahrain after the regime violently suppressed popular protests in March and April 2011. In 2012, the U.S. administration decided to lift the hold on the majority of these sales; most of the remaining items on hold have dual-use capabilities for internal crowd control. Still, with a stalemate between the government and its opponents fueling radical elements within the opposition, there is more to be done.

Pressing close allies on issues related to their domestic affairs need not jeopardize simultaneous collaboration on a range of strategic priorities, whether that is finding an end to the Syria conflict, countering terrorism, stabilizing Egypt, or addressing Iran’s nuclear program. State security depends both on a military advantage vis-à-vis foreign threats and on promoting a more inclusive political culture at home. Bahrain again is a case in point. The status quo increasingly threatens Bahraini as well as American interests by enabling the rise of a more radical opposition that may eventually threaten the U.S.

presence in Bahrain. The United States must articulate the case to its allies that, for the sake of mutually desirable regional stability, governments have to stay ahead of demands for change by enacting substantive reforms.

The United States should recognize its role as the more powerful partner, act accordingly, and feel confident in doing so. In the first instance, this means that U.S. diplomats should risk raising uncomfortable, often contentious issues regarding domestic political reform, knowing that though the action may produce some irritation, it will not undermine or jeopardize the larger strategic relationship. More systematically, U.S. officials should integrate military and diplomatic aspects of the U.S. policy toolkit to promote reform.

SECURITY ASSISTANCE INITIATIVES

Use foreign military sales (FMS) more deliberately and selectively to both build the defense capacity of Gulf states and promote domestic reform. U.S.

military sales reinforce U.S. security commitments to the Gulf on threats of mutual concern. But withholding military items, particularly those used in internal repression and high-value items that offer prestige to Gulf regimes, can also signal U.S. concern about Gulf domestic policies and potentially compel Gulf regimes to enact specific reforms.

Initial efforts to condition FMS have had mixed results. For instance, in Bahrain, the policy intent was to shape regime calculations toward reform, but conditions were applied in a sweeping manner. Moreover, U.S. military officers working in the Office of Security Cooperation at the U.S. embassy in Manama were not well-equipped to communicate goals of the pause in sales to their Bahraini

counterparts. This opacity and uncertainty became an irritant in the relationship, creating friction in the operational interactions between U.S. defense personnel and their local counterparts.

Moving forward, the U.S. policy on FMS in the Gulf should be more collaborative, creative, and better tailored to U.S. priorities for external defense and domestic reform for each country. FMS should begin with a U.S.-Gulf dialogue on future threats and a frank discussion about the necessity of domestic political reform. Dual-use FMS items that can be wielded to repress internal dissent should not be sold to governments that have a history of human rights abuses. When conditionality is attached to FMS, U.S. officials should communicate clear milestones for reform that are understood by both the partner government and the Office of Security Cooperation personnel charged with managing FMS and interacting with local military officials on a daily basis. The January 2014 Presidential Policy Directive on conventional arms transfers offers additional consistent guidelines that could be used in shaping U.S.-Gulf discussions of FMS sales, including how to reconcile human rights concerns with regional stability and defense capacity-building objectives.

Improve interagency collaboration to promote the rule of law and better coordinate security and civilian programs.

The Departments of Justice and the Treasury, as well as the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, can and should work together to ensure that security cooperation activities are integrated into the larger set of U.S. activities in each Gulf state focused on domestic institution building and reform messages. They should fund technocratic reforms in

areas such as police reform, prison rehabilitation, and judicial capacity building to bolster the rule of law within existing local institutions. Greater interagency collaboration can ensure that these civilian programs are coordinated with the appropriate technical training programs sponsored by the Defense Department. In Bahrain, for example, this might mean focusing on integrating greater numbers of Shia into both the police and the Bahrain Defense Force.

Reinforce the focus on reform promotion in International Military Education and Training (IMET) activities. The Departments of Defense and State should review the Gulf states' participation in IMET programs to ensure that mid- and junior-level officers who are likely to ascend to positions of power later in their careers take part. The program should recruit top officials from across each country's defense establishment. The training curriculum for foreign officers at U.S. staff colleges should be updated to reflect the new strategic imperatives in the Middle East, with a more explicit discussion of topics such as diversifying the security services, police conduct, and civilian-military responses to domestic threats. These topics can be framed in light of the larger issue of regional stability, emphasizing that lasting security hinges on genuine political reform and inclusiveness in the security sector.

Ensure U.S. military engagement at all levels emphasizes reform objectives. To effectively exert leverage on reform, the United States has to take advantage of its officials' frequent liaison interactions with security and defense counterparts in the Gulf at every operational level. Too often, senior military officials deliver appropriately emphatic messages on reform to their Gulf counterparts,

but at the mid- and junior-level, this emphasis is diluted or countermanded by the need to maintain “friendly” working relations.

The Department of Defense, working with the Department of State, should ensure that all officials in the U.S. Central Command and service components involved in military cooperation with Gulf states are fluent in the overall U.S. policy goals for the Gulf, to include the promotion of political reform and human rights.

Establish stricter mechanisms to oversee U.S. counterterrorism initiatives in the Gulf.

The U.S. government should work with Gulf regimes to ensure that national-security-related institutions, such as counterterrorism courts established as part of the joint counterterrorism efforts launched after the September 11 attacks, are not being used to repress peaceful political dissent. The Gulf states have long tried to convince the United States that the incarceration or deportation of activists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Shia political societies, or even conservative Salafi networks falls under the rubric of “counterterrorism,” when in reality many of these actors constitute a legitimate political opposition. The United States should use its strong, collaborative ties with the GCC states on counterterrorism issues to both enhance information sharing and apply greater scrutiny and skepticism when faced with these claims.

DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES

Arrange for a high-level speech that articulates a comprehensive, positive vision for the U.S.-GCC alliance. Now is the time for a significant speech, preferably made by the U.S. president, to outline a positive strategic vision for the region reaffirming U.S. commitment to Gulf regional alliances

and describing the necessary reforms. Such a speech should include a restatement of the vital U.S. national security interests that Obama listed in his speech to the United Nations in 2013 (which mostly apply to the GCC). It should make a clear commitment to expanding the GCC-wide regional security architecture and outline a road map to build that architecture. And it should present a strong narrative about the requirements of meaningful political reform for long-term stability and the sustainability of the U.S.-Gulf partnership.

Use public and private diplomacy carefully but consistently to demonstrate commitment to reform.

U.S. officials across departments and agencies should make it clear that the United States will speak out if activists, journalists, lawyers, and oppositionists demanding peaceful change are arrested or repressed. The violations of international standards with regard to civil liberties vary by Gulf country, so the U.S. government should decide on the priorities for each state individually. Freedom of association, for example, could be a priority for Bahrain; freedom of the press and Internet for the United Arab Emirates; and workers’ rights for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. American officials should then articulate tailored recommendations for each government.

In some cases, Gulf regimes have signed international treaties or conventions that provide the United States with standards for civil liberties and political rights, and Washington can use them as benchmarks. All U.S. officials, including those from the military and intelligence communities who interact with Gulf counterparts should be well-versed in the areas of U.S. concern. Any reform issues articulated in public by U.S. officials

should first be communicated firmly behind closed doors at the highest levels.

Make Bahrain the focus of U.S. reform promotion in the Gulf. The new U.S. approach should be geared toward empowering pragmatic moderates in opposing camps to reach a “best case” outcome. That outcome should be the resumption of parliamentary politics with fair voting, which Bahrain has lacked since 2002, and an elimination of gerrymandering that has so far made Sunni blocs dominant.

To compel both sides toward this outcome, the United States must continue its sustained, high-level engagement with the Al Khalifa, making it clear firmly but cordially that reconciliation with the opposition based on compromise serves all sides—and is an intrinsic part of state security in the post-2011 era. This is a diplomatic problem, but military tools can help as well. If the situation in Bahrain deteriorates, U.S. officials should prepare an appropriate contingency plan for moving the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters.

Diplomats should encourage al-Wefaq to commit to avoiding excessive demands, such as its calls for the ouster of the prime minister, that will play in favor of the hardliner camp. Ideally, al-Wefaq will accept more limited increases in its parliamentary power, such as the right to approve ministerial nominees.

The Al Khalifa should be engaged indirectly through its primary Gulf patrons, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have to be convinced that reform is necessary for the stability and the sustainability of the U.S. military presence in Bahrain, or they will not encourage reforms and might try to play the spoiler.

U.S. diplomatic efforts should also support the implementation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) as a road map for reform. The BICI report, commissioned and endorsed by the king, addresses the significant socioeconomic and political grievances of Bahraini oppositionists across the spectrum as it protects current political arrangements, including the institution of the monarchy. By returning to the recommendations and focusing on continued progress, the United States can reassure its regional allies that it seeks neither the end of the Al Khalifa monarchy nor a Shia-majority government but rather an increase in political, economic, and social rights for all Bahrainis. Congress should take an active role in overseeing U.S. diplomatic efforts to support BICI implementation through frequent hearings with the State Department, independent outside experts, and Bahraini witnesses, including oppositionists.

Bolster multilateral meetings at both the foreign and defense ministry levels to promote better GCC integration. The United States should push to make the GCC a more viable multilateral security institution rather than a collection of bilateral relationships, though the process will be beset by challenges. This goal will require a sustained U.S. effort to overcome deeply entrenched obstacles to GCC military integration, demonstrated most recently by the withdrawal of Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini ambassadors to Qatar over Doha’s support to the Muslim Brotherhood. To temper this distrust, the State and Defense Departments should hold more multilateral forums with Gulf foreign and defense ministries with the aim of helping the staffs of these ministries develop greater cooperation and a stake in reform. The State Department’s Security Cooperation Forum meetings and Secretary of Defense

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Chuck Hagel's recent announcement of a U.S.-GCC defense ministerial both represent valuable arenas for fostering greater cohesion among the Gulf states. U.S. officials should push for these meetings to focus on a more inclusive definition of security that encompasses political reform. The United States should also build upon existing niche areas of successful multilateral military cooperation among the GCC, such as maritime defense and counter-piracy, which carry relatively low political costs for the individual states.

Reinvigorate Gulf-based Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) activities and provide better protection to grant recipients.

Traditionally, recipients of MEPI-related grants have focused mostly on noncontroversial economic and social reform projects, such as training for female entrepreneurs and efforts to encourage small business development. The current political climate in the Gulf presents a distinct and challenging operating environment for these grant recipients, both because of the anti-American stigma attached to grantees and because foreign-backed nongovernmental entities are carefully scrutinized and increasingly persecuted by regional governments.

The State Department needs to significantly rethink its approach to MEPI assistance, including how and where the grant-making

process should occur and how grantees can operate in the region to advance reform. Washington must stand by its assistance decisions once they have been made and offer protection to MEPI grantees, alumni, and organizations when they are directly threatened with legal punishment or political pressure from Gulf regimes.

MOVING TOWARD A NEW ERA

The United States should more effectively exert its leverage to bring about much-needed reforms in the Gulf. Doing so in the current climate of U.S.-Gulf discord over regional policy toward Syria, Iran, and Egypt will admittedly be challenging. But U.S. officials should not fall into the trap of thinking that promoting domestic reform must take a backseat to securing Gulf cooperation on U.S. regional priorities. A holistic approach to security that includes addressing the root causes of political and social unrest not only better reflects U.S. values than the current approach but is increasingly necessary to prevent serious challenges to Gulf leaders—and to U.S. assets and people.

Successive U.S. leaders have reaffirmed this imperative in speeches, but U.S. policy efforts must accelerate, particularly in light of the shifting regional dynamics. Applying carefully calibrated leverage on issues where the United States has a clear preponderance of clout will more effectively align strategy with aspirations. **C**