



Distorted Equations Among Gulf Countries

Sourced & Compiled by Mr. Arvind Sinha - CEO

Impact of Middle East changing equations?



Last month, U.S. President Donald Trump embarked on his first foreign trip, which began in Riyadh. There, the administration and Saudi officials sent a clear message: Iran is a destabilizing force in the region, which “nations of conscience” must counter.

Parts of the trip were heavily criticized in the region and beyond, with some observers even insinuating that the trip sparked a split among the Gulf Arabs. Trump can't be blamed for that split—the Gulf Arabs are no monolith, and disagreements have been rift—but he did embolden hard-line factions in the Gulf.

How to deal with Iran has always been the subject of debate within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Although all of the countries in the group aim to stand up to their powerful neighbor, each differs on how. The nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran brought these divisions to the forefront. Under Saudi Arabia's leadership, Bahrain and most of the UAE were skeptical of the deal, highlighting their concerns about Iran's regional meddling. Others, including Oman and the Emirate of Dubai hoped to capitalize on the deal and forge new trade partnerships. Kuwait and Qatar found themselves in the middle. They were eager to contain Iran, but also to lessen tensions. After all, they share interests with Iran, including gas fields and trade.

The Yemen conflict complicated matters further. Riyadh led a bombing campaign in Yemen to check perceived Iranian influence over the Houthi rebels. Riyadh was convinced of Iran's hand in the conflict. But others were less certain. This is because Iran's role in the conflict isn't clear-cut, and its support for the rebels is overstated. Oman, for example, refused to join the Saudi-led coalition. Those who joined in the coalition with Saudi Arabia—the rest of GCC—viewed the United States under U.S. President Barack Obama as increasingly pivoting away from the Persian Gulf, and they wanted to show they could stand on their own two feet by guaranteeing their own security.

But as the Yemeni conflict dragged on, disagreements within the GCC intensified. The incessant and indiscriminate bombing campaign was hardly justifiable and did little to improve the participating states' security, credibility, and image. Increasingly, the effort wasted resources at a time when the involved countries needed to tighten their belts, and body bags kept coming back home. Some began to question the effort, especially when their interests were ignored or seen as secondary to Riyadh's. Abu Dhabi, for example, was mainly interested in containing the spread of Islamism in southern Yemen, but at times, this goal conflicted with Riyadh's battle against the Houthis. Meanwhile, the UAE became increasingly aware of its own military and political strength. UAE officials highlighted its indispensable military contribution to the Yemeni campaign, and its public diplomacy became more vigorous and visible.

But the debate and disagreements remained behind closed doors. Ironically, as the disagreements increased, the UAE and Saudi Arabia grew publicly closer, with Saudi officials referring to the Emiratis as their “closest allies in the region.” They described their alliance as one “forged by common blood, sacrifice, and destiny.” And the GCC seemed fully united on Iran. In January 2017, during a visit to Tehran, Kuwait's Emir delivered a letter outlining the preconditions for dialogue with Iran that was endorsed by the GCC, including Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaiti offer required Tehran to withdraw from Arab affairs. Tehran responded positively to the idea of talks, but said that the preconditions weren't acceptable. The Kuwaiti initiative, coupled with the success of the negotiations between Tehran and Riyadh over the Hajj pilgrimage earlier this year, seemed to pave the way for a unified GCC policy promoting dialogue with Iran.

Trump's first visit to the region occurred as these debates grew. For their part, the Iranians re-elected the moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who pushed for dialogue with Iran's Gulf Arab neighbors. But Trump complicated things. His open embrace of the more hard-line factions in the Kingdom sent a signal to Tehran that regardless of its policies, the United States wouldn't be responsive to changes in Iran and would continue its business-as-usual policy of isolating the country. The virulent anti-Iran stance sparked criticism from some quarters within the GCC, including from Qatar's Emir. While officials from Qatar denied making these statements, they sparked an unprecedented diplomatic crisis within the alliance.

Today, the spat between the GCC allies is both vocal and public. This week, five Arab countries, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, publicly broke ties with Qatar over its "embrace of various terrorist and sectarian groups aimed at destabilizing the region." Involving more than concerns about terrorism, this is likely just the latest in a long-running effort to isolate the Qataris, including over their perceived embrace of Iran. For Trump to effectively work with the GCC allies and manage tensions with Iran, his administration must understand that the Gulf Arabs are not a monolith. Tensions have and will always exist, as each country tackles its own security concerns. And rather than stoking regional tensions and emboldening the hard-liners in Riyadh and other Gulf capitals by arguing that Iran can't be reasoned with, the Trump administration must leverage its influence to encourage regional dialogue that can better address existing divisions.

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