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Narrowing the Gulf: U.S. and GCC Revamp Relations at Camp David Summit

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By Hussein Ibish

Executive Summary

Following several years of strained relations, the May 13 to 14 U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Washington and Camp David provided the parties with a crucial opportunity to reset their partnership. Despite numerous predictions of failure and the absence of four of the six GCC heads of state, the talks achieved significant results for both parties, including:

- A clear restatement of the U.S. commitment to Gulf security modeled after the 1980 “Carter Doctrine.”
- A clear statement of GCC support for the nuclear negotiations with Iran, and greater understanding among Gulf states of U.S. policies toward Iran.
- A mutual commitment to develop and enhance joint, self-reliant Gulf and Arab military structures and security measures, including a region-wide ballistic missile defense system.
- A new set of working groups, committees, and other forums for cooperation, consultation, and coordination, and an emerging timeline for continuing the dialogue, including another summit scheduled for 2016.
- A common approach to dealing with regional security challenges.
- Stronger mechanisms for meeting asymmetrical threats.

While numerous issues remain not fully resolved, and there is some way to go before the U.S.-GCC relationship is fully restored to previous levels of consultation, coordination, and trust, the new understandings and structures developed at the summit provide a clear and coherent framework for strengthening the partnership across the board in coming months and years.

Background

When U.S. President Barack Obama announced on April 2 that the international negotiating consortium known as the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany) had concluded a framework with Iran outlining a potential agreement on its nuclear

program, to be achieved by June 30, he expressed concern about opposition from traditional U.S. allies. He said he had already spoken with Saudi Arabia's King Salman and intended to invite the heads of state of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to meetings later that spring "to discuss how we can further strengthen our security cooperation while resolving the multiple conflicts that have caused so much hardship and instability throughout the Middle East." The invitations were subsequently issued for a dinner at the White House on May 13 followed by meetings at Camp David on May 14.

Saudi and some other Gulf states' concerns about the drift of U.S. policy date back to the January 2011 Egyptian uprising against former President Hosni Mubarak, and the perceived American willingness to "abandon" a long-standing ally. Although their views and policies on some issues are not homogeneous – with Qatar taking a different view of events in Egypt, for example – doubts among most GCC member states about U.S. policy were greatly exacerbated in subsequent years. The proximate cause and immediate context for the summit were the international negotiations with Iran, which were the subject of open and undisguised anxiety on the part of several key Gulf states, which feared that Iran's regional hand could be strengthened not only by an agreement, but potentially even by the enhanced legitimacy conferred by the negotiations themselves. They also feared a shift in U.S. policy in the context of an effort to achieve an agreement with Iran on the nuclear file, and possibly a broader Washington rapprochement with Tehran that could take the form of either a loose and de facto U.S.-Iranian alliance or, more plausibly, a new U.S. policy to seek a "balance" between Arab Sunni and pro-Iranian forces in the region.

These concerns were based on a negative interpretation of both American words and deeds in the second Obama term. A number of U.S. policy decisions fueled speculation that the administration was seeking to appease Iran in the context of the nuclear talks. Particularly damaging was the perception that U.S. policy in Syria was being shaped by a desire in Washington not to be seen as threatening a de facto Iranian sphere of influence. These suspicions were exacerbated by a series of statements, mostly in interviews, by Obama that have been interpreted as indicating a new American attitude toward Iran and its ambitions at the expense of Arab interests.

In a January 2014 interview with David Remnick of *The New Yorker*, Obama appeared to endorse the idea that a balance of power between "predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran" is the key to stability. A March 2014 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *Bloomberg* was widely interpreted as suggesting that Obama sees Shiite Muslims, even extremists, as fundamentally rational while implying that Sunni Muslims, or at least Sunni extremists, don't share that rationalistic perspective. In April Obama told Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* that, "The biggest threats that they [U.S. Gulf Arab allies] face may not be coming from Iran invading. It's going to be from dissatisfaction inside their own countries."

These comments, especially to Friedman, appeared to downplay the threat from Iran's destabilizing activities and suggested that, insofar as they are threatened by instability, the Gulf states have only themselves to blame. The president's remarks played in Gulf societies much as comments that seemed to blame U.S. foreign policy for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks did in the United States. However, Obama's remarks did articulate widespread American concerns that Islamist extremists are supported by Gulf financing, if not from governments then certainly by charities, wealthy individuals, and other non-governmental entities operating with or without the knowledge of the authorities. At a minimum, many Americans believe governments in the Gulf could do more to curtail financing and

rhetorical support for extremists.

As alienation grew between the United States and its Gulf partners, by 2013 GCC states began actively implementing more independent foreign and national security policies. In late 2014, the GCC states began planning a joint military command for the organization. And in March the Arab League agreed to create a unified Arab military force for intervention against non-state actors or to preserve the stability of member states requesting assistance. This last decision was adopted during the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen designed to push back the advance of the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels. The U.S.-GCC summit was convened in the context of these mutual doubts and suspicions, and increasingly divergent perspectives on key policy issues, especially the nuclear talks and other U.S. policies toward Iran. The aim of both sides was a reset in relations, to stop the drift away from each other, and to develop new understandings to inform greater cooperation, especially on security-related issues.

Major Issues and Accomplishments at the U.S.-GCC Summit

Against this backdrop, and despite widespread predictions of failure for the summit, the meetings were surprisingly successful. Critics made much of the fact that four of the six GCC heads of state did not attend the meeting. The “missing” leaders included United Arab Emirates President Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said, Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and, most notably, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz. These absences, especially that of Salman, were widely interpreted as a “snub” by the GCC leaders to the United States. This interpretation is difficult to sustain given the relative success of the summit, and the very high level of the Saudi delegation that did attend, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The king may well have wanted his first visit to the United States, and major trip outside of Saudi Arabia, as monarch to be focused on his own role rather than being part of a larger group. Some of the other missing leaders were not expected to attend due to health reasons. Despite the absences, both sides appeared to achieve what they primarily hoped to get out of the meetings. Most importantly, they set the stage for a thematically and chronologically structured continuing dialogue on a wide range of issues of mutual concern.

U.S. Commitment to Gulf Security

One of the most significant of the summit’s accomplishments was the strong U.S. restatement of its “ironclad” commitment to Gulf security against external threats. While some GCC states, particularly the UAE, have strongly hinted they would like a formal mutual defense treaty with the United States, U.S. officials made it clear in the run-up to the summit that no such new treaty obligation is on the table. Apart from the administration’s own reservations, Congress is unlikely to approve, and the public is likely to strongly oppose, new U.S. military obligations in the Middle East. Therefore, according to all reports, the question of a mutual defense treaty was not raised by either side at the summit. Instead, the United States strongly reiterated its long-standing informal, policy-based commitment to Gulf security.

The summit joint statement includes the following key passage: “The United States policy to use all elements of power to secure our core interests in the Gulf region, and to deter and confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War, is unequivocal.” This is essentially

a restatement of the 1980 “Carter Doctrine” introduced in President Jimmy Carter’s January 23, 1980 State of the Union address. Carter declared that, “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” The summit statement reiterates this commitment, while also pointing to the crucial example of the 1990-91 Gulf War, in which the United States led the coalition that expelled Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

A New Framework for Ongoing Dialogue

Perhaps the most important achievement of the summit was the accomplishment of a detailed framework that will structure the ongoing dialogue between the two sides both thematically and chronologically. The parties established a series of committees and working groups, some of which will operate within the already-established U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum, and some of which add a new dimension to the conversation. A Forum Working Group, for example, will be tasked with developing joint efforts to ensure border security, prevent terrorism financing, promote cyber-security, and ensure critical infrastructure protection. The parties also established a senior working group to examine potential U.S. cooperation with the Arab League plan to establish a “unified Arab force” to deal with peacekeeping and stabilization efforts in member states that request assistance.

These plans are probably the most significant outcome of the summit because they give form and structure to the U.S.-GCC dialogue, ensuring that the conversation is not ad hoc or haphazard. Some of the new structures go well beyond the existing forum, and have their most significant iteration in the commitment of the two sides to “meet again in a similar high level format in 2016,” reportedly somewhere to be determined in the Gulf region. These commitments send a number of clear messages. The United States, by formalizing and giving even greater structure to the dialogue, is acknowledging the importance and centrality of this partnership.

The Gulf states may be sending an even greater message of renewed confidence in the administration. The parties had been due to hold another summit in two years, when the Obama presidency would be over. Since the 2016 summit will be held in the Gulf, it is virtually certain that bringing the meeting forward by a year was an initiative from the GCC states, since they had to issue the invitation. This suggests that the Gulf states are no longer content with a timeline that could allow them to “wait out” the end of the Obama administration and hope for a better relationship with his successor. To the contrary, the upcoming meeting, being brought forward by one year, suggests a strong interest in maintaining an intensive and high-level dialogue with this administration. It is therefore a significant vote of confidence in Obama himself, as well as his administration.

In addition to the chronological significance of the timeline, much of the thematic content of the structured dialogue demonstrates a convergence of U.S. and GCC agendas around developing the military capabilities of the GCC states, both individually and as a collective. The United States and the Gulf states have found a common purpose in building these capabilities, which simultaneously reflects both the U.S. desire to, where possible, draw down its military commitments in the Middle East and the determination of the Gulf states to become more self-reliant in the protection of their national security. In particular, both parties are interested in promoting integrated self-defense systems, especially ballistic missile defense, and greater interoperability among Gulf, and other Arab, military establishments.

Weapon Sales and Military Technology Transfer

Among the contentious issues in the run-up to the summit were certain requests for high-level military technology transfer and weapon sales by GCC states that have not been approved by the United States. Saudi Arabia and others have sought access to the cutting-edge American fifth-generation fighter jet, the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, without success. While the Gulf states are seeking a “qualitative military edge” (QME) over Iran, Israel seeks to maintain a QME over any potential group of regional adversaries, including the Gulf states. The U.S., and especially congressional, commitment to Israel’s broad regional QME is probably the single biggest factor impeding the transfer of F-35 jets and similar next-generation weaponry to Gulf states. Similarly, the UAE is set to receive a consignment of Predator drones, but they will remain unarmed until further notice. However, all reports from the summit indicate that rather than bickering about F-35s or other weapons systems understood to be “off the table” for now, the parties focused on a range of defense systems enhancements for the Gulf states. In a largely symbolic move, in December 2014 Washington decided to allow weapon sales to the GCC as an organization, much as it does with NATO and the African Union. This step could eventually allow for potentially greater integration and interoperability promoted by American weapons sales to GCC states, both individually and collectively.

The summit joint statement commits the United States to helping the GCC “develop a region-wide ballistic missile defense capability, including through the development of a ballistic missile early warning system.” Washington has promised to fast-track weapons deliveries to GCC states, and is dispatching a group of experts in the coming weeks to manage the details. The system will require a central command-and-control platform that will undoubtedly be produced by key American defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, or Northrop Grumman. Raytheon’s Patriot missile systems in the Gulf are being upgraded to incorporate the new PAC-3 missiles manufactured in conjunction with Lockheed. In addition to the existing Patriots, there is also already an American-made AN-TPY-2 missile-scanning radar system deployed in the region.

New systems will be region-wide and longer-range, including Lockheed’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system that identifies potential threats by heat pattern. According to Reuters, Gulf states are requesting access to Aegis combat systems, including Raytheon’s SM-3 missiles, but the United States apparently believes Aegis systems are unnecessary for current Gulf security because they focus on threats from beyond the earth’s atmosphere. Iran is not capable of mounting such a threat. Experts have suggested that the SM-6 missile, which counters threats both inside and beyond the atmosphere, could be a potential compromise. The UAE has already contracted to buy two THAAD batteries, in addition to its Patriot PAC-3 systems. Saudi Arabia is also upgrading from PAC-2 to PAC-3. So is Kuwait, which contracted to buy two more PAC-3 batteries in 2013. Qatar has ordered THAAD batteries and requested PAC-3 ones, and is in the process of developing an early warning facility with the United States. Oman has Patriot PAC-3 systems in place. These GCC installations are augmented by the two American Aegis-equipped destroyers in the Gulf waters, plus those being deployed in Rota, Spain in 2015, as well as U.S.-run Patriot PAC-2 and -3 batteries in Bahrain.

As hardware and software for such a region-wide ballistic missile defense system is developed, there will also have to be a detailed understanding within the GCC states, and between them and the United States, about the rules of engagement for identifying and dealing with any potential missile threat. Such understandings do not currently exist, raising the potential for mistakes, misidentification, and the possible targeting of friendly aircraft. Moreover, extensive U.S. training will be required to ensure

that the systems work effectively and optimally, while avoiding mishaps. Joint exercises with the United States – especially, experts say, “Track 1” or “Track 1.5” multilateral scenario-based exercises – will be crucial in preparing the way for such a system. Existing American hubs such as the U.S. Combined Air Operations Center, Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center, and Gulf Air Warfare Center can be integrated into the emerging system to promote interoperability.

U.S. officials and experts, however, stress that in order for the integrated ballistic missile defense system to be effective, Gulf states must commit to a new level of information-sharing, particularly on early-warning and tracking data. This necessarily involves not only cooperation, but also some surrender of national autonomy regarding the nature of the data to be shared. This will be a difficult step for the Gulf states to take. However, these mutual understandings are particularly important given that warning time in the Gulf region for a ballistic missile threat could be as little as four minutes. Therefore, common threat assessments, desired operational outcomes and objectives, and information sharing systems are indispensable.

Iran’s Regional Role

The issue that prompted the United States to organize the summit, the nuclear negotiations with Iran, remains the biggest, and most defining, issue shaping U.S.-GCC relations, and mutual perceptions. Gulf perceptions of shifting U.S. policies are driven by many factors, but above all is Washington’s opening to Tehran. No topic reportedly received more attention at the summit than Iran’s regional role and policies and the U.S. approach to them. The joint statement adopted a clear stance that identifies Iran as a major destabilizing force in the Middle East and pledged the cooperation of both sides to oppose Iran’s regional ambitions. It states that, “The United States and GCC member states oppose and will work together to counter Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region and stressed the need for Iran to engage the region according to the principles of good neighborliness, strict non-interference in domestic affairs, and respect for territorial integrity, consistent with international law and the United Nations Charter, and for Iran to take concrete, practical steps to build trust and resolve its differences with neighbors by peaceful means.”

GCC attitudes toward Iran, and some other crucial issues, are neither static and fixed, nor uniform and homogenous. Indeed, one of the most interesting early revelations about the Iran talks is that the essential terms were established in back channel negotiations in Oman, a GCC member state. Over the course of the past few years, Oman’s role evolved from secretly passing messages between the two sides to actively mediating secret negotiations in Vienna and Muscat. Oman’s role surprised many observers, but it indicates the complexity and nuance of the Gulf position on nuclear negotiations with Iran. It’s not simply that Oman has, for a Gulf state, uniquely strong relations with both Iran and the United States. It is also that the general Gulf view of the Iranian negotiations is more complex than most observers tend to think.

The anxieties described earlier in this paper are very real, and are the dominant and majority Gulf reaction to the negotiations. However, many Gulf actors are simultaneously anxious and optimistic about the prospect of an agreement, and are open to viewing it as a positive and beneficial development. The Gulf states understand that they have to live with Iran, and that it will be a major player in their region and factor in their strategic calculations. Even Saudi Arabia has tried to maintain cordial relations with Tehran, despite the rivalry between the two and their incompatible positions on numerous regional and global issues.

Oman has significant trade links with Iran, and a wide range of close relations that date back to before the fall of the Shah. Given the sultanate's close relations with Iran, it's perhaps not surprising that, unlike its GCC partners, Oman has no record of expressing concern regarding Iran's nuclear program, and has said that it fully believes Iran's assurances that its program is entirely peaceful and civilian. Nonetheless, Oman remains a core GCC member state and a close ally of the United States, putting it in a unique position in the political and strategic landscape of the Gulf region. Moreover, Oman's independent foreign policy has not been the source of considerable tensions within the GCC unlike disagreements between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Qatar on the other. Its GCC partners apparently think Muscat's quiet, careful diplomacy strengthens their hand as a group and gives them access and influence they would otherwise lack.

Oman's approach to Iran is not driven by a fundamentally different analysis than the other GCC member states. It clearly believes that Iran is the primary potential regional threat to its interests, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. But its approach to dealing with the same perceived threat differs somewhat from some of its council partners, emphasizing the use of diplomacy and cultivation of good relations to mitigate any potential threat. However, Oman is by no means alone in using this approach, even if it has placed a greater emphasis on it than its partners. For example, Kuwait has maintained good relations with Iran, and significant diplomatic, military, and economic links. Kuwait welcomed the "Islamic Revolution" and relations with Iran were further enhanced following the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91. Qatar, too, has maintained friendly relations with Iran following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war during which Doha strongly supported and financed Iraq.

Iranian relations with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been more difficult. The UAE has a significant territorial dispute with Iran, which is the primary obstacle to better relations between the two countries. Despite close trading ties and a large Iranian expatriate community in Dubai, both countries claim three Gulf Islands: Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb, which are currently under Iranian control. In 1999 the UAE criticized Saudi Arabia's warming of relations with Iran because of the ongoing dispute over the islands. However, the UAE's foreign policy in recent years has tended to focus more on the threat from Islamist groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood regional movement, and terrorist organizations than Iran. UAE-Iran ties are also enhanced by the joint operation by the two countries of the Salman oilfield, an offshore platform in the Gulf about 90 miles south of Lavan Island. The UAE's foreign minister officially visited Iran in November 2013. The UAE was among the first of the GCC states to welcome the nuclear framework, expressing strong hopes that it would prove a stabilizing influence in the region and prevent conflict.

Saudi-Iranian relations have been a bumpy affair since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, during which Saudi Arabia strongly backed Iraq. Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of playing a destabilizing sectarian role in the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq, charges that are returned in kind by Tehran. One of the most serious incidents reflecting Saudi-Iranian tensions was a clash between demonstrating Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces in Mecca during the Hajj on July 31, 1987. An estimated 400 protesters died in the violence. Mobs in Tehran ransacked the Saudi Embassy and physically assaulted Saudi diplomats in retaliation, killing one. Diplomatic relations were severed for many years. A slow but protracted diplomatic thaw between the countries began at a 1997 meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Iran. However, Saudi-Iranian relations began sharply deteriorating again in the second decade of the 21st century. In 2011, Iranian agents were accused of plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. Saudi accusations about Iranian hegemony and aggressive policies as the primary threat to regional stability and security inform much of its strategic thinking

and diplomatic rhetoric. The intervention in Yemen has been framed by Saudi officials as an effort to roll back the Houthi rebels, who are cast, and perhaps caricatured, as merely Iranian proxies. Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of seeking a nuclear weapon as part of its hegemonic project in the region.

Of all the GCC states, Bahrain has the most difficult historical relationship with Iran, given that Iran has a historical claim on the whole island. This was officially renounced in 1970, and the renunciation codified in a subsequent demarcation agreement between the two countries. Doubts about Iran's long-term intentions, however, persist. Bahrain's governments, dominated by the ruling Al Khalifa royal family, which is part of the minority Sunni community, have faced numerous rebellions centered on the country's Shiite majority. A significant subsection of the Shiite community of Bahrain is of ethnic Iranian origin. Bahrain has consistently accused Iran of being responsible for these periods of unrest, especially the protest movement that began in February 2011. Iran's role in the instability is hotly contested, with little evidence having been presented to demonstrate the charges, and angry denials from the mainstream Bahraini opposition and Iran. Bahraini courts have sentenced several Iranians to lengthy prison terms on charges of spying on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and promoting sedition.

Bahrain's Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa has been one of the most outspoken Gulf leaders in accusing Iran of seeking to develop a nuclear weapon. Indeed, his accusation to this effect in November 2007 may have been the first public charge by a Gulf leader that Iran is seeking to become a nuclear weapons power. On the other hand, like all of its GCC partners, even Bahrain supports Iran's right to have a peaceful and civilian nuclear weapons program. The primary concern of the GCC states is the strengthening of Iran's regional hand as a nuclear power, through an agreement and possible rapprochement with the United States, or even simply as a consequence of the negotiations themselves. On the other hand, the Gulf states recognize that there is little, if anything, they can do to prevent Iran from going nuclear and that they have few options other than relying on U.S. initiatives to try to prevent this eventuality. They also understand that a conflict over the Iranian nuclear program could have devastating consequences for the region, including their own states. Therefore, an effective and sound agreement that actually prevents Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is the best plausible outcome from their point of view.

At the summit, Obama and other administration officials reportedly explained in detail what the United States is hoping to accomplish through the negotiations. All accounts suggest that the president insisted that the United States views the negotiations as strictly limited to the nuclear file and is not seeking a wide-ranging rapprochement with Iran. Obama reportedly told the Gulf delegations that he felt misunderstood and that some of his public comments had been misconstrued, particularly in the Arab world. He stressed the U.S. commitment to Gulf security and made the case that the negotiations and the potential agreement with Iran they anticipate, while not perfect, are the best approach to dealing with a difficult problem.

Gulf officials apparently felt reassured that the actual terms of the potential agreement are tougher on Iran than have been generally reported in the press, and that the "breakout time" for Iran to go nuclear in the context of such an agreement would be longer than is widely thought. Like many other observers, the Gulf states believe that there are many issues that need to be clarified in any final agreement. They are particularly concerned about the inspection protocol, verification mechanisms, and the ability of sanctions to "snapback" in the event of Iranian violations. However, it would appear that either the Gulf states have been considerably reassured by what they heard at the summit, or have decided that supporting the negotiating process is the best course of action available to them in

spite of their misgivings. Either way, their public position now clearly endorses the negotiations. The joint statement includes the following passage, which constitutes a significant achievement for the United States: “a comprehensive, verifiable deal that fully addresses the regional and international concerns about Iran’s nuclear program is in the security interests of GCC member states as well as the United States and the international community.”

The Gulf states may not be entirely convinced by U.S. reassurances about the status of all aspects of U.S. policies toward the region, but they appear gratified by Washington’s insistence that there is no “tilt” toward Iran involved in the negotiations or offered as a consequence of a successful agreement. Moreover, Gulf officials maintain that their states would “tilt” toward Iran if Tehran were to significantly modify its aggressive policies. The primary Gulf concern was, and still is, that Iran might somehow acquire (or have already acquired) greater U.S. acquiescence (or at least less U.S. opposition) to its ambitious regional policies without having to modify them in any substantive way. But given the range of commitments offered to the GCC states, it has become harder to see the United States as seeking an alliance or understanding with Tehran as a substitute for traditional friendships.

Mutual doubts between the two sides were somewhat assuaged by the meetings and their largely positive outcome, but not yet entirely dispelled. Some Saudis are publicly warning that their country will not watch Iran acquire a nuclear weapon without seeking a deterrent of their own. They note that Pakistan has research and development know-how, and Jordan large uranium reserves, and that they have strong relations with both. Saudi Arabia is indeed moving to establish a peaceful nuclear energy program. But it’s evident that Saudi Arabia would prefer not to get involved in a nuclear arms race with Iran and, for now, the best prospect for avoiding that difficult choice actually lies with the U.S.-led international negotiations with Iran.

Regional Security Concerns

The summit considered the problem of regional conflicts from a relatively integrated perspective, without falsely conflating them into a single issue. The summit joint statement says of such conflicts – specifically including those in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya – that “there is no military solution” and that they “can only be resolved through political and peaceful means.” The statement says such political solutions must involve “respect for all states’ sovereignty and non-interference in their internal affairs; the need for inclusive governance in conflict-ridden societies; as well as protection of all minorities and of human rights.” Despite their commitments to political solutions, the parties at the summit are almost all involved in military interventions, however limited, in these conflicts. The United States is leading an ongoing intervention against the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria and Iraq, while Saudi Arabia is leading a campaign against the Houthi militia and its allies in Yemen, and Egypt, which is allied with both the United States and the Gulf states, along with the UAE, has carried out airstrikes against Islamist-allied groups in Libya. With a few exceptions, most summit participants are also involved in arming, training, or funding belligerent parties in one or more of these conflicts.

The joint statement offers an implicit limited endorsement of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, but emphasizes “the need to rapidly shift from military operations to a political process.” It praises the five-day “humanitarian cease-fire” and calls for a longer and more extensive cessation of hostilities. The statement also “underscored the imperative of collective efforts to counter Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula,” and strongly endorsed measures to “prevent the resupply of Houthi forces and their allies in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 2216.” The annex to the joint statement

goes further in emphasizing U.S. support for GCC measures to “defend themselves against external threats emanating from Yemen,” and for “Saudi Arabia’s territorial integrity.”

The language on Iraq in the joint statement is cautious, emphasizing the role of the Iraqi government in fighting ISIL. It touches delicately on the role of sectarian Shiite militias in the conflict, urging the Iraqi government to ensure that “all armed groups operate under the strict control of the Iraqi state,” and only hints at the critical problem of Sunni Arab alienation by calling on the Iraqi government to urgently address “the legitimate grievances of all components of Iraqi society.” The annex commits the GCC states to “reestablishing a diplomatic presence in Baghdad.” The parties did not refer in any of their public comments to urgently required efforts to create new National Guard or other Iraqi forces designed to bring the Iraqi Sunni Arab community into the fight against ISIL in a systematic or formal manner. It does not appear that this subject was a significant factor in the conversations.

The joint statement language on Syria includes a clear-cut passage in which the parties “reaffirmed that Assad has lost all legitimacy and has no role in Syria’s future.” This is reflective of formal U.S. policy since the country spiraled out of control following the 2011 uprising. However, during most of his second term, Obama has tended to avoid questions involving President Bashar al-Assad’s future, leaving such blunt comments to subordinate officials, most notably Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL General John Allen. It is, therefore, noteworthy that the summit joint statement involves such unequivocal language regarding the Syrian regime.

The joint statement also refers to the conflict in Libya, challenges facing Lebanon, and the need to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It calls for power sharing in Libya, strengthening the Lebanese state (especially against the challenge from ISIL), and a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. It reiterates the “enduring importance” of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, recommitting the GCC to this as-yet unrequited but crucial Arab overture to Israel. It may be that there are, or at least have been until recently, more divisions within the GCC than between most GCC states and the United States on Libya and Palestine. Qatar has a history of supporting Libyan Islamist groups and Hamas, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have supported Libyan nationalists and the mainstream Palestinian leadership.

These divisions appear to have been receding since the accession of the new emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who has adjusted his country’s foreign policy by reducing support for the regional Muslim Brotherhood movement, initiating a rapprochement with Egypt and distancing Doha from Hamas. There are also indications that Saudi Arabia, under King Salman, has become less categorical in its opposition to the Brotherhood movement, which has suffered a series of devastating defeats since the 2013 ouster of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, and may be perceived as less of a regional power and, hence, less of a threat. With both these states adjusting their policies toward regional Islamists, especially of the Muslim Brotherhood variety, differences within the GCC, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, may also have eased.

As its complex attitude toward the Yemen intervention suggests, the United States may be finding itself in an ambivalent posture toward greater Arab, GCC, and Saudi (in that order of specificity) regional political and military assertiveness. On the one hand, the United States has always favored burden sharing and, therefore, a greater self-reliance on the part of the Gulf states. This impulse has been strengthened in recent years as a consequence of the negative experiences with the war in Iraq and the nation-building program in Afghanistan. There is widespread political support in Congress and among the American people for a reduced U.S. military role in, and commitment to, the Middle East.

And, finally, administration policy continues to look toward a gradual “pivot to Asia,” and implicitly away from the Middle East and Europe, whereby U.S. military and diplomatic assets will be shifted toward East Asia. All of these factors militate in favor of U.S. encouragement of, and practical support for, Arab self-reliance on defense and security.

In practice, however, this inevitably involves some lessening of influence over Arab national security decision-making. The Obama administration was far more cautious, if not anxious, about the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen than its public positions overtly indicated. It felt obliged to support the intervention even while it doubted its wisdom or efficacy. This dynamic is likely to increase in the coming years as the GCC, and perhaps even the Arab League, continue to develop their integrated military structures and, presumably, engage in more “peacekeeping and stabilization” (as the joint statement puts it) missions in the region. Its Arab allies will expect U.S. support, especially given Washington’s burden sharing rhetoric, whether or not the United States fully shares the policy analysis that informs these specific missions. At a minimum, these new realities will involve a period of adjustment, particularly in terms of American expectations and the United States’ sense of its own role in the Middle East. The new dialogue about the U.S. role in helping to develop and expand a new level of self-reliant Gulf and Arab national security capabilities initiated at the summit, and carefully structured for further dialogue, cooperation, and consultation is the best way to manage this transition. It maximizes the prospects for cooperation and minimizes the possibility of misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Asymmetric Threats

Asymmetric threats reportedly played a significant role in the dialogue at the summit. The more self-reliant GCC and Arab forces will be mainly aimed at dealing with asymmetrical threats and non-state actors such as terrorist groups, militias, pirates, criminal gangs, and similar destabilizing elements. U.S.-GCC cooperation on security into the future will likely focus on combating such asymmetrical threats, including emerging concerns such as cyber and maritime security. Counterterrorism, in its various forms, is a major feature of both the joint statement and its annex, and the dialogue at the meeting itself. It is also one of the main focal points of the working groups and committees.

Counterterrorism cooperation between the parties will crucially include counter-radicalization messaging, under the rubric of “counter violent extremism” (CVE), preventing the recruitment of foreign fighters by extremist groups, cutting off terrorism financing, and finding political solutions to regional conflicts. New levels of cooperation with the United States on cyber-security and critical infrastructure protection provide additional opportunities for security enhancement in the Gulf states. Maritime security and interdiction is another key emerging area of mutual concern, and requires the enhancement of cooperation, coordination, and information-sharing between GCC member states, as well as with the United States. Indeed, maritime security may involve the need to create joint patrol and interdiction forces among GCC members, promoting military integration and interoperability, which is emerging as a major policy goal and requirement for the Gulf states with regard to a wide range of security concerns.

Another major issue at the summit was counter-terrorist financing, underscored by the participation of Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew. Lew joined the conversations to address that issue and also the impact of sanctions on the Iranian economy. Lew reportedly stressed that combating terrorism financing would curb Iranian influence and promoted greater regional stability. And Lew and other

senior officials explained how sanctions would work in the context of a nuclear deal with Iran. In November 2014 Treasury Under Secretary David Cohen told a congressional hearing that Qatar and Kuwait are “the two jurisdictions in the Gulf where additional steps could be taken” to curb the illicit transfer of funds to ISIL. He said that the funding of terrorist groups is best combated by interrupting revenue streams, restricting access to international financial institutions, and imposing sanctions on leaders and key supporters.

Insofar as the GCC can enhance its counterterrorism credentials with not only the White House, but also Congress and the American public, it will greatly strengthen its partnership with the United States and dispel negative impressions that persist in American society. For the Gulf states counterterrorism is not only a matter of vital self defense and national security, and practical cooperation with its U.S. partners, it also includes a strong element of public diplomacy. Perhaps the biggest challenge in the long run to strengthening and securing close relations with the United States is the need for the Gulf states to be perceived by most Americans, not only in the government but also in the policy community and general public, as crucial partners in the battle against terrorism and violent extremism. The initiatives and frameworks developed at the summit provide new and important opportunities to promote national security and strengthen the alliance by creating, implementing, and publicizing effective counterterrorism and counter-radicalization efforts.

Conclusion

While some important issues remain unresolved and strains persist in the U.S.-GCC partnership, an unexpected amount of progress was made at the recent summit to repairing relations and creating a new framework for stronger future cooperation. Washington and its Gulf Arab partners appear to have developed an important set of structures for moving forward through both existing and enhanced new forums for dialogue, timelines, working groups and committees, and other formats that have given a new shape and specificity to their dialogue. Moreover, in mutually embracing the agenda of developing independent and self-reliant Gulf and Arab defense and national security mechanisms and military institutions, the United States and the GCC countries have identified a guiding principle around which to organize their long-standing project of ensuring Gulf security.

Along with the important restatement of the U.S. commitment to Gulf security, and, in effect, reiteration of the “Carter Doctrine,” the development of these thematic, institutional, and chronological frameworks for ongoing dialogue is, perhaps, the most significant achievement of the summit. The decision by the Gulf states to seek another summit meeting in one, rather than two, years sends a strong signal that the GCC came away from the meetings with a more positive view of Obama and his administration than they may have previously held. The new depth, breadth, and detail of the frameworks for dialogue, coordination, and cooperation established at the summit give the U.S.-GCC relationship a solid framework for developing into the foreseeable future.

