



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



The AGSIW *Gulf Rising* Series

The GCC View of Russia: Diminishing Expectations

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Over the last decade the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have energized their role in regional politics, from the use of military intervention, to increased bilateral foreign assistance, to more robust regional coordination. This, combined with a perception of U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, has prompted GCC countries to seek and establish strong relations with other centers of power – regionally and globally.

This paper was developed as part of AGSIW's *Gulf Rising* series analyzing the energized role of the Gulf Arab states in the international system. The series looks beyond GCC relations with the United States to examine ties with other key countries and regions. Additionally, it investigates motivations behind Gulf Arab states' foreign policy choices and evaluates the implications for U.S. foreign policy toward the GCC states and the region.

About the Author

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Executive Summary

Gulf Cooperation Council countries' hopes that economic incentives could persuade Russia to drop support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and distance itself from Iran have been frustrated. Attempting to do so by offering Moscow even greater incentives or through raising Moscow's costs are unlikely to succeed either. Instead of changing Russia's policies, then, the GCC states should instead focus on the more realistic goal of containing Russian influence in the region.

Policy Recommendations: Gulf Arab States

Pursue a policy of containment and focus on achievable goals

- The Gulf Arab states should pursue a policy that acknowledges (if only tacitly) that the Assad regime is going to survive in much of Syria so long as Russia and Iran continue to support it.
- The Gulf Arab states should focus on more achievable goals rather than trying to bring down the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.
- The Gulf Arab states should ensure that the Syrian opposition is strong enough to prevent the Assad regime from eliminating it or retaking the entire country.
- Rather than focusing on eliminating Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, the Gulf Arab states should aim to seek to prevent the spread of Russian and Iranian influence beyond Syria by shoring up friendly governments in Jordan and Turkey, as well as both Sunni and Shia groups disaffected with Iran in Iraq and Lebanon.

Align with allies

- The Gulf Arab states should seek to make common cause with other countries that have grown fearful of Russian President Vladimir Putin's threatening behavior elsewhere, especially in Europe.
- The Gulf Arab states should enter talks with the United States and other countries in the West about how to deal with the common Russian threat both in Europe and the Middle East.

Introduction

Prior to the Russian military intervention in Syria that began in September 2015, some Gulf Cooperation Council governments had become hopeful that they could induce Russia to accept the GCC objective of the departure of President Bashar al-Assad from Syria and that Moscow would distance itself from Tehran in exchange for stronger economic ties with the GCC. With the Russian intervention in Syria, however, it has become clear that this approach has not succeeded in altering Russian foreign policy. The question that now arises is: Can the GCC states that are most anxious for a change in Russian policy toward Syria and Iran do anything to encourage such a shift?

GCC Frustration with Moscow

In an article simultaneously published on June 21 in the Saudi Gazette, Arab News, and Qatar's The Peninsula, the well-known Saudi commentator Abdulaziz Sager discussed the outcome of the May 26 Moscow meeting between foreign ministers from Russia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. In the article, he observed that despite past GCC hopes of cooperating with Moscow, "the fact that Russia is aligned with the GCC's main adversaries in the region points to the clear limitations in the further development of bilateral ties." He noted that, "Moscow is hoping that the GCC countries will be pushed in Russia's direction due to their disappointment with US policy and because issues such as Syria cannot be solved without Russia's involvement." But, he observed, "There are clear limits to what the GCC can offer Russia to persuade it to modify its approach to the region, as economic incentives are clearly insufficient to alter Russian policy." He concluded that while the GCC should maintain a dialogue with Russia, "one should have no illusions that such talks will form the basis of a broader strategic relationship in the near future."¹

These views are similar to those expressed privately by well-connected Saudis, Qataris, and Emiratis. Prior to the direct Russian military intervention in Syria that began in September 2015, there had been hope in Gulf Arab states that Moscow could be drawn away from its firm backing of Iran and the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria through mainly economic incentives, including large-scale GCC purchases of Russian arms, substantial investment in Russia, and increased trade that would be worth far more than anything Iran could provide. The Gulf Arab states' unwillingness to go along with Western economic sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea and actions in eastern Ukraine was a sign of their respect for Russian interests in an area Moscow considers vital (and the GCC does not). Further, the GCC seemed prepared to accommodate what it saw as Moscow's main interest in Syria: retaining the naval base at Tartus. Indeed, the combination of Russia's increased economic strains, due to Western sanctions and low oil prices, and the prospect of the GCC serving as an economic lifeline could reasonably be expected to result in Moscow deferring to the GCC in Syria with regard to the future of Assad, especially if – under GCC guidance – the new Syrian government was willing to cooperate with Russia.

But as Sager wrote, it is now apparent that, "economic incentives are clearly insufficient to alter Russian policy." Nor has Moscow proved amenable to persuasion in the various meetings between GCC and Russian officials since the commencement of the Russian intervention in Syria. On the contrary, Moscow appears to have persuaded itself that the GCC states will have little choice but to defer to Russia with regard to Syria and Iran.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry went to Moscow in mid-July with a proposal to increase Russian-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation in Syria in an effort to salvage cease-fire efforts² even though Russian and Syrian government forces have continued to attack the non-jihadist opposition forces backed by Washington and the United States' regional allies.³ In addition,

¹ Abdulaziz Sager, "[GCC-Russia: Time to move beyond rhetoric](#)," *Arab News*, June 21, 2016.

² Carol Morello and Karen DeYoung, "[Kerry arrives in Moscow with a proposal for Syria in hand](#)," *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2016.

³ "[Obama retreats from Putin in Syria – again](#)," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2016.

as Hussein Ibish discussed in a recent study, several Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria) do not share the GCC fear of Iran or they see the Assad regime as preferable to its Sunni jihadist opposition.⁴ The surprise improvement in Russo-Turkish relations at the end of June suggests that Turkish President Recip Tayyip Erdogan, who had been implacably opposed to the Assad regime remaining in power in Syria, now sees Assad as preferable to the empowerment of the Syrian Kurdish opposition or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – and needs Russian help in containing both. And as Ibish noted, while all the GCC states might prefer that Iran not be the dominant regional actor in Syria, four of them are not actively confronting Russia on this. Oman actually maintains good relations with Tehran. The Kuwaiti and Bahraini governments are not actively involved in countering Iran in Syria. The United Arab Emirates has become increasingly concerned with the rise of Sunni jihadist forces in Syria and has been (like Moscow) supportive of the efforts of the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to suppress what it sees as similar forces in Egypt. Additionally, the UAE is actively increasing its economic relations with Russia. Among the GCC states, then, it is mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar that are still insisting on Assad's departure. And with Saudi Arabia preoccupied with the conflict in Yemen, Moscow may calculate that there is a severe limit to the resources that Riyadh is willing and able to devote to supporting Assad's opponents in Syria.

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Since Saudi Arabia and Qatar appear increasingly isolated from the United States, the West, other Arab states (including some in the GCC), and even Turkey, in their effort to bring about the downfall of Assad, Moscow may now feel confident that, with help from Russia, Iran, and Hizballah (as well as Iranian-backed Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias), the Assad regime can survive in those portions of Syria that are important to Moscow. Moscow may calculate that Riyadh and Doha will sooner or later have to adjust to a reality that they cannot alter. Similarly, while the GCC states may not like how close the Russian-Iranian relationship has become, they will sooner or later realize that their best interests lie in currying Moscow's favor so that it will have an interest in acting to restrain Tehran's actions vis-à-vis the Gulf. Moreover, Moscow views its intervention against Sunni jihadists in Syria as helpful to Riyadh since these groups also threaten the Saudi monarchy.⁵ Finally, Moscow sees Russia and the GCC states (as well as others in the Middle East) as opposing what it considers to be Washington's misguided democratization efforts.

GCC governments – especially in Saudi Arabia and Qatar – will not eagerly accept this logic. But what policy options do they have? Are there policies they can pursue with regard to Russia that would actually accomplish their aim of toppling the Assad regime as well as blunting what many of them see as an existential threat from Iran?

⁴ Hussein Ibish, "What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?" *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 30, 2016.

⁵ Vitaly Naumkin, "Despite airstrikes, is Russia still working toward political solution in Syria?" *Al-Monitor*, October 12, 2015.

Unpromising Options

Two obvious alternatives suggest themselves. One is for those GCC states that can do so to offer Moscow much greater inducements than they already have for Russia to drop its support for Assad and distance itself from Tehran. The other is for Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular to greatly increase the costs Moscow and Tehran must pay for backing Assad. This could be done in two ways: through even greater GCC support for the Syrian opposition – much like Saudi Arabia, along with the United States and several other states, imposed on the Soviets for their support for the Marxist regime in Kabul by supporting the Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s; and through GCC efforts to hurt Russia and Iran economically by keeping oil prices low until they change course on Syria.

But there is strong reason to doubt that either of these policy alternatives would succeed. With regard to greater inducements to Moscow, Sager's statement about how "economic incentives are clearly insufficient to alter Russian policy" bears repeating. If Russian President Vladimir Putin were primarily interested in Russia's economic well-being, he never would have annexed Crimea or interfered in eastern Ukraine. As Marie Mendras, one of France's foremost Russia-watchers recently pointed out, Putin is increasingly oblivious to how his confrontational policies are harming the economic interests of the Russian elite.⁶ A much higher priority for him is projecting an image of Russia as a great power, and thus even the suggestion that he would abandon one long-term ally and drop another in return for any amount of economic benefits is anathema to him. In addition, for Moscow the concern would be that complying with GCC calls to distance itself from Iran in exchange for closer ties to the GCC would result in Russian-Iranian relations deteriorating but Russian-GCC ties not appreciating sufficiently to compensate Moscow.

Underlying this view is Moscow's deep distrust of Saudi Arabia, which long predates Putin. Moscow believes the Saudi-inspired high levels of OPEC oil production in the 1980s caused the decline in oil prices that significantly weakened the Soviet Union economically. Additionally, Riyadh rallied the Muslim world to oppose the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which not only hurt Moscow's military efforts there, but also greatly diminished the image that Soviet leaders had attempted to project of Moscow being the defender of the Muslim world against the West. Both before and after Putin's rise to power, Russian officials and commentators regularly accused Saudi Arabia of supporting Muslim rebels in Chechnya and elsewhere in Russia. Additionally, many Russian officials and commentators believe that Riyadh orchestrated the spread of the 2011 Arab Spring protests to Libya and Syria, both Russian allies, with the ultimate goal of promoting Muslim rebellion inside Russia itself. By contrast, despite important differences between Moscow and Tehran, Russia and Shia Iran share fears about the West as well as about Sunnis (radical or otherwise) both in the Arab world and inside their own countries. Thus, while Russia wants increased economic ties to the GCC, Moscow is not going to sacrifice relations with a Tehran with which it shares security concerns in exchange for the promise of better relations with a Riyadh that it sees as implacably hostile toward Russia.

⁶ Marie Mendras, "Russian Elites are Worried: The Unpredictability of Putinism," *German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Academy*, June 30, 2016.

Similarly, while GCC states might be able to raise the costs to Moscow for supporting Assad and cooperating with Tehran, it is doubtful that they can raise them enough to bring about the desired changes in Russian behavior, much less the departure or downfall of Assad. Nonetheless, some of the possible methods to increase the costs include supplying the Syrian opposition (perhaps without public acknowledgement) with shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles to target Assad regime, and even Russian, aircraft; increasing general military assistance to the Syrian opposition; and even introducing forces from one or more GCC countries into the conflict. The Russians and their allies, though, would likely react quite vigorously to counter any of these moves. This would include a stepped up propagand campaign seeking to persuade Western audiences, in particular, that GCC states are supporting Sunni jihadists in Syria.

Further, increased GCC support for the Syrian opposition would complicate relations with the West. The European Union would be unhappy if, as is highly likely, Europeans saw this as resulting in continued, or increased, refugee flows to Europe. The outgoing administration of U.S. President Barack Obama would not be pleased either, viewing increased GCC support for the Syrian opposition as hindering its diplomatic efforts (no matter how unpromising) to work with Russia for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Given Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's positive statements about Putin and negative ones about Muslims, a Trump administration would likely try, at least initially, to cooperate with Moscow, and so would not welcome increased GCC support for Assad's opponents. An administration of Hillary Clinton, Democratic presidential candidate, would likely take a tougher line toward Russia. However, Clinton would not want to see an escalation of conflict in Syria that she would have to respond to amid ongoing concerns over Russia's intentions toward a fragmenting Europe and China's intentions toward its Asian neighbors.⁷ Increased support for the Syrian opposition, then, would incur high costs for the GCC but with little prospect for bringing down Assad or ending Russian support for him.

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Aside from further involvement in the Syrian conflict themselves, Saudi Arabia and other GCC oil producers can also punish Russia and Iran for their intervention by maintaining or possibly increasing levels of oil production in order to keep prices low, or even push them lower. Putin, though, may believe that continued low oil prices actually hurt the GCC states more than Russia or Iran, if only because he may believe that Gulf Arab societies are far less used to dealing with economic hardship than are Russians and Iranians. Putin, then, may calculate (accurately or not) that GCC governments will need relief from low oil prices in order to maintain domestic stability much sooner than the Russian and Iranian governments.

⁷ Nina Khrushcheva has argued that despite his evident preference for Trump over Clinton, Putin might find the latter much easier to work with than the former. Nina Khrushcheva, "Putin's Pick: Clinton or Trump?" *CNN*, July 4, 2016.

Thus, just as the present GCC approach has not led to the downfall of Assad or a curtailment of Russian support for him and cooperation with Iran, a stepped up GCC effort to court Russia via economic incentives or punish it via increased military aid to the Syrian opposition or continued oil production levels that keep oil prices low do not appear promising either. What other policy options, then, remain?

Reconceptualizing the Problem

The goal of bringing down the Assad regime through supporting its armed opponents is extraordinarily ambitious. During the Cold War (especially its early years), the United States brought about leadership changes in several countries, but usually by supporting one faction within a regime against another. The Soviet Union on several occasions succeeded in helping Marxist guerillas overthrow pro-Western regimes, but these efforts usually took many years and were greatly aided by the United States reducing or ending military assistance to a beleaguered ally, often as a result of U.S. domestic political pressure.

The downfall of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011 as well as the Marxist regime in Afghanistan in 1992 supports the belief that something similar could be brought about in Syria. However, there were elements facilitating regime collapse in these two cases that are not present in Syria. Comparing Libya and Syria is the simpler case: There were several governments, Arab and Western, that intervened in support of the Libyan opposition while no government intervened in support of Qaddafi. By contrast, although the Syrian opposition has received important support from some GCC states and Turkey, it has not received much from the West. More importantly, Iran and its various Shia militia allies, as well as Russia, are intervening strongly in support of Assad.

Comparing Afghanistan and Syria is even more telling. Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988-89, not because the mujahedeen drove them out, but because Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, amid a reordering of domestic and foreign policy priorities, decided that the costs of keeping Soviet forces in Afghanistan exceeded the benefits of doing so. Even then, Gorbachev continued large-scale military assistance to the Marxist regime in Kabul. This only ended when the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991 and the new Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, put a stop to it. It was then that the Afghan Marxist regime collapsed a few months later, but even this occurred partly as a result of one faction within the regime collaborating with an opposition faction.⁸

Like the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, a Russian withdrawal from Syria is only likely within the context of a broader reordering of Russian domestic and foreign policy priorities by a post-Putin regime attempting to deal with the many serious internal challenges (including economic stagnation, ethnic and sectarian tensions, extraordinary corruption, demographic decline, health care crisis, and elite rivalries) that Putin has not resolved and in some cases has exacerbated. Iran may also be in a similar spiral, thanks to the counterproductive internal

⁸ Mark N. Katz, "[Lessons of the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#)," *Middle East Policy Council*, March 9, 2011.

policies being pursued by the Islamic Republic. But whether the regimes in Moscow and Tehran will collapse or just experience long-term stagnation, there is little that the GCC states – or anyone else – can do to change their current policies with regard to Syria.

Thus, rather than fruitlessly attempting to get Russia to change its Syria policy, much less trying to bring about regime change in Damascus, the GCC states might have better success with pursuing a policy of containment that acknowledges (if only tacitly) that the Assad regime is going to survive in much of Syria so long as Russia and Iran continue to support it. The GCC states could focus instead on more achievable goals. Instead of trying to bring down the Assad regime, they could concentrate on the more modest goal of ensuring that the Syrian

opposition is strong enough to prevent the Assad regime from eliminating it or retaking the entire country. Rather than focusing on eliminating Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, the GCC states might aim to seek to prevent the spread of Russian and Iranian influence beyond Syria by shoring up friendly governments in Jordan and

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Turkey (though doing so in Turkey will not be easy if the political turmoil arising from the failed coup attempt continues), as well as both Sunni and Shia groups disaffected with Iran in Iraq and Lebanon. Further, GCC states should be prepared to take advantage of problems that Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus face, especially in their relations with one another. Despite the image that Moscow and Tehran like to present, Russian-Iranian relations have long been difficult, and there are numerous sources of contention between them with regard to Syria.⁹ Further, while Riyadh and Moscow were recently able to agree on the desirability of a production freeze to bolster the price of oil, Tehran refused, and thus the effort collapsed. Leaving aside the question of whether GCC oil producers could have done more to exploit Russian-Iranian divergence on this issue recently, it is a disagreement that is likely to remain and could present opportunities to exploit in future.

Further, the GCC states could seek to make common cause with other countries that have grown fearful of Putin's threatening behavior elsewhere, especially in Europe. Instead of seeing Western concern about Russian actions in Ukraine or the Baltics as distractions from what the GCC sees as more important concerns about Syria and Iran, GCC states could enter talks with the United States and other countries in the West about how to deal with the common Russian threat both in Europe and the Middle East.

Containment policies such as those suggested here will obviously not result in an end to Russian support for the Assad regime or close cooperation with Iran any time soon. But they can lead to one very important change in the diplomatic dynamics of Russian support for Syria. The pursuit of the more ambitious aim of bringing about the departure or downfall of Assad by some GCC states has allowed Moscow to isolate them from those in the West and the Middle East fearing that a jihadist regime will emerge in Syria. Focusing on the less ambitious aim of containing Russian (as well as Iranian) influence, by contrast, could be the means by which the GCC can join with others, especially in the West, to isolate Russia instead.

⁹ Tom Cooper, "[Russia, Syria and Iran Have Made a Mess of Their Military Alliance](#)," *War Is Boring*, June 15, 2016.

Finally, the GCC's own "worst case" fear motivating some to call for a turn to Moscow – the belief that Washington is abandoning the GCC in favor of Iran – has not come true, and is not likely to either. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has made clear that he is unwilling to countenance a broader improvement in Iranian-U.S. relations beyond the nuclear agreement since, in his perspective, Washington only seeks improved ties to Tehran in order to more easily infiltrate and overthrow the Islamic Republic. Indeed, the Iranian hard-liners most determined to support Assad may be doing so not just in pursuit of their regional ambitions, but precisely to prevent the Iranian-U.S. rapprochement that they fear will undermine their power, or even the system of the Islamic Republic itself. Even if Iranian-U.S. relations have somewhat improved, it does not make sense for the GCC to respond by moving closer to Russia. Moscow has much closer (albeit contentious) relations with Tehran, and it has no intention of giving these up for the sake of improved Russian-GCC ties.

Conclusion

The GCC cannot persuade or force Russia to change its policy toward Syria and Iran. On the other hand, the GCC does not have to acquiesce to Moscow and accept relations with it on Putin's terms. A policy of containment, pursued in conjunction with the GCC's Western allies, offers the best hope of limiting the impact of Russia's intervention in Syria and cooperation with Iran.

