



# NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
EDUCATION AND THE ARTS  
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT  
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE  
INFRASTRUCTURE AND  
TRANSPORTATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
LAW AND BUSINESS  
NATIONAL SECURITY  
POPULATION AND AGING  
PUBLIC SAFETY  
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
TERRORISM AND  
HOMELAND SECURITY

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

This electronic document was made available from [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org) as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Skip all front matter: [Jump to Page 1](#) ▼

## Support RAND

[Purchase this document](#)

[Browse Reports & Bookstore](#)

[Make a charitable contribution](#)

## For More Information

Visit RAND at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

Explore the [RAND National Defense Research Institute](#)

View [document details](#)

## Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND electronic documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND electronic documents are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see [RAND Permissions](#).

This product is part of the RAND Corporation conference proceedings series. RAND conference proceedings present a collection of papers delivered at a conference or a summary of the conference. The material herein has been vetted by the conference attendees and both the introduction and the post-conference material have been reviewed and approved for publication by the sponsoring research unit at RAND.

CONFERENCE  
PROCEEDINGS

---



# The Future of Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change

Mutual Equities and  
Enduring Relationships

David Aaron, Frederic Wehrey, Brett Andrew Wallace

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The research described in this report was prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The research was conducted within the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by OSD, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data** is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-0-8330-5913-0

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

**RAND**® is a registered trademark.

© Copyright 2011 RAND Corporation

Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Copies may not be duplicated for commercial purposes. Unauthorized posting of RAND documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND documents are protected under copyright law. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit the RAND permissions page (<http://www.rand.org/publications/permissions.html>).

Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation  
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138  
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050  
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665  
RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org>  
To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact  
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;  
Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)

## Preface

---

These conference proceedings document the discussions that occurred during a conference titled “Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change: Mutual Equities and Enduring Partnerships,” which was held on June 20, 2011, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. The conference was jointly sponsored by U.S. Central Command and the Army Directed Studies Office.

Topics at the conference included the Arab Spring, Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League unity, the Iran question, and Persian Gulf region militaries. One hundred participants attended the conference, including senior government officials, academics, military officers, and members of the media. There were two opening speakers, four panel presentations, and a luncheon presentation. Each panel consisted of one moderator and three experts on Gulf affairs. General James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, provided opening remarks. Puneet Talwar, senior director for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states at the White House National Security Council, served as the keynote speaker. Booz Allen Hamilton’s Persia House provided the luncheon presentation.

The RAND Corporation’s support for the conference was provided jointly by the Intelligence Policy Center and the International Security and Defense Policy Center, both within the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community.

For more information on the Intelligence Policy Center see <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/ndri/centers/intel.html> or contact the director (contact information is provided on the web page). For information on the International Security and Defense Policy Center, see <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/ndri/centers/isdp.html> or contact the director (contact information is provided on the web page).



# Contents

---

<b>Preface</b> .....	iii
<b>Summary</b> .....	vii
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	ix
<b>Conference Agenda</b> .....	1
<b>Biographies</b> .....	3
<b>Panel One: The Arab Spring—Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change</b> .....	7
Presentations .....	7
Questions and Answers .....	10
<b>Panel Two: The Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League Political Unity—Implications     for U.S. Foreign Policy</b> .....	13
Presentations .....	13
Questions and Answers .....	15
<b>Panel Three: Iran in the Gulf—Defining the Challenge and the Arab Response</b> .....	17
Presentations .....	17
Questions and Answers .....	19
<b>Panel Four: Gulf Militaries and Political Change</b> .....	21
Presentations .....	21
Questions and Answers .....	23
<b>Conclusion and Closing Remarks</b> .....	25





## Summary

---

On June 20, 2011, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington D.C., RAND, U.S. Central Command, and the Army Directed Studies Office convened to host a conference titled “Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change: Mutual Equities and Enduring Partnerships.” One hundred participants attended the conference, including senior government officials, academics, military officers, and members of the media. Presentations delivered by experts on Persian Gulf affairs during four panel sessions designed to inform and educate commanders, strategists, and planners at U.S. Central Command produced lively discussion and debate about ongoing events in the Middle East. The conference organizers were honored to have General James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, provide opening remarks and to have Puneet Talwar, senior director for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states at the White House National Security Council, serve as the keynote speaker.

Given the dynamic and fluid nature of events throughout the Arab world in the preceding six months, the conference focused on the security implications of a rapidly changing Gulf region and their potential effects on U.S. Central Command. The panel topics were the Arab Spring, the prospects for and implications of a more-unified Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), how Gulf militaries and their relationships with the United States may be affected by political changes, and how present-day events may influence or alter the threat posed by Iran.

These conference proceedings present summaries of the panel presentations and of their respective question and answer sessions. They also include a summary of the closing remarks made by RAND senior policy analyst Fredric Wehrey, who discussed the conference’s major themes and conclusions. The entire conference was operated under Chatham House Rules.

Five key points, summarized below, emerged from the conference.

**An “Arab Winter of Discontent” in the Gulf?** The notion that there is in fact an Arab Spring at all in the Middle East may be misplaced; there is a strong potential for backsliding toward authoritarianism. Compared with the rest of the region, dissent in the Gulf was muted, primarily because of the longstanding availability of oil rents and Gulf states’ higher standard of living. Other factors include the states’ relatively small and homogenous populations, frequent intermarriage among the ruling families and key elites, external support from the United States, and the ability of ruling regimes to play a game of divide and rule against the opposition. In the wake of the Arab revolts, Gulf regimes are resorting to time-tested tactics: making superficial political reforms, engaging in dialogue with the opposition, buying off key elites, and reshuffling cabinets. Whether these cosmetic measures are sufficient to ensure long-lasting stability is unclear. In the case of Bahrain, the ruling family’s legitimacy may have been fatally tarnished, and this may have important implications for U.S. strategy in the theater.

**The “new” Gulf unity may be illusory.** The belief that a new era in GCC unity is emerging needs to be carefully scrutinized. On the surface, there is newfound coherence and assertiveness. However, there are underlying structural impediments to the GCC achieving real, workable unity. The smaller Gulf states have a long history of thwarting GCC unity schemes as a way to irritate Saudi Arabia. The Gulf as a whole still has a long way to go in the area of military coordination. That said, the injection of Jordanian military expertise into the Gulf and the recent experience of the GCC militaries in Libya and Bahrain could herald a new chapter in Gulf military cooperation.

**Although still a threat, Iran has not emerged the winner.** The belief that Iran’s power has been enabled or amplified by the ongoing tumult in the Arab world is misplaced. Certainly, the Iranians desire to exploit the turmoil among the United States’ Arab allies. But Iran has encountered numerous obstacles and limitations in attempting to project its influence, many of which stem from Iran’s ongoing domestic crisis and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s declining stature among the Iranian elite. The Bahrain crisis has also demonstrated the limits of Iran’s influence and showed that, even when Iran’s coreligionists are endangered, the Islamic Republic is guided by pragmatic calculations. The Syrian regime’s crackdown is degrading Iran’s standing on the “Arab street” as protestors are increasingly associating Iran and Hizballah with the despised regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Many of the GCC’s fears about Iran’s power are real and well founded, but others reflect a sort of popular hysteria and anxiety about change in the region. Such fears are being used cynically by regimes to deflect attention from domestic problems.

**Gulf disenchantment with the United States is growing, but partnerships will endure.** A key theme of the conference was the Gulf’s widespread disenchantment with and anxiety about the reliability of the United States as a security partner—feelings exacerbated by the United States’ seeming abandonment of its longstanding ally, Hosni Mubarak. As a result, there may be an increased preference in the Gulf for “security diversification” designed to supplement, but not supplant, U.S. assistance. There is turbulence in Saudi-U.S. relations, but it is unclear whether this friction represents a real, significant break in the partnership. Several panelists noted that the Saudi-U.S. relationship has undergone similar turbulence in the past and that geopolitics always carries the day. Specifically, the threat of Iran is an enduring pillar of cooperation, and the United States will continue to be “the security patron of choice.”

**The status quo on security cooperation may be unsustainable over the long term.** During the final panel, speakers argued that it is necessary *not* to continue the status quo on security cooperation in the Gulf. In particular, the panelists advocated recalibrating security sector and political reform in the Gulf to ensure that the Gulf does not remain a region in stasis and stagnation. The longstanding contract between the ruling families and their militaries should not be seen as immutable; indeed, the role of the Egyptian military in Mubarak’s fall has prompted Gulf leaders to look at their militaries and officer corps with new scrutiny.

## Acknowledgments

---

The conference organizers would like to thank General James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, and his deputy, Vice Admiral Robert Harward, for cosponsoring the conference and for posing challenging and timely questions to the panelists about the future of U.S. policy and military strategy in the Gulf. Additionally, we are grateful to Puneet Talwar, senior director for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states at the White House National Security Council, for his trenchant and insightful opening remarks. Several other individuals who played a part in planning and putting on the conference deserve to be thanked: Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy Simmons and Daniel Halse of the Army Directed Studies Office cosponsored the conference and were integral to its success; Amy Potter of RAND performed much of the behind-the-scenes work to make sure the conference ran smoothly; and Booz Allen Hamilton provided an excellent lunch presentation on the Iranian nuclear program. Lastly, all of the moderators and speakers deserve special thanks for volunteering their time and sharing their expertise.



## Conference Agenda

---

### **Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change: Mutual Equities and Enduring Partnerships**

June 20, 2011, Mayflower Hotel, Washington D.C.



#### **Welcome**

Ambassador David Aaron, RAND Corporation

#### **Opening Remarks**

General James Mattis, Commanding General, U.S. Central Command

#### **Keynote Speech**

Puneet Talwar, Senior Director for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf States, White House National Security Council

#### **Panel One: The Arab Spring—Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change**

Moderated by Ambassador James Dobbins, RAND Corporation

#### **Panel Two: Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League Political Unity— Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy**

Moderated by Ambassador Charles Ries, RAND Corporation

#### **Luncheon Presentation: “How Iranians View Their Country’s Nuclear Program”**

Booz Allen Hamilton’s Persia House

#### **Panel Three: Iran in the Gulf—Defining the Challenge and the Arab Response**

Moderated by Ambassador David Aaron, RAND Corporation

#### **Panel Four: Gulf Militaries and Political Change**

Moderated by Kenneth Pollack, Brookings Institution

#### **Concluding Remarks**

Fredric Wehrey, RAND Corporation





## Biographies

---

**General James N. Mattis** serves as commander, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which is located in Tampa, Florida. Gen. Mattis has commanded at multiple levels. As a lieutenant, he served as a rifle and weapons platoon commander in the 3rd Marine Division. As a captain, he commanded a rifle company and a weapons company in the 1st Marine Brigade. As a major, he commanded Recruiting Station Portland. As a lieutenant colonel, he commanded 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, one of Task Force Ripper's assault battalions in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. As a colonel, he commanded 7th Marines (Reinforced). Upon becoming a brigadier general, he commanded first the 1st Marine Expeditionary Brigade and then Task Force 58 during Operation Enduring Freedom in southern Afghanistan. As a major general, he commanded the 1st Marine Division during the initial attack and subsequent stability operations in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In his first tour as a lieutenant general, he commanded the Marine Corps Combat Development Command and served as the deputy commandant for combat development. He also commanded the I Marine Expeditionary Force and served as the commander of U.S. Marine Forces Central Command. Prior to this assignment, he served both as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Supreme Allied Commander Transformation from 2007 to 2009 and as commander, U.S. Joint Forces Command, from 2007 to 2010. Gen. Mattis, a native of the Pacific Northwest, graduated from Central Washington State University in 1972. He is also a graduate of the Amphibious Warfare School, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and of the National War College.

**Puneet Talwar** is the senior director for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states at the White House National Security Council. He is responsible for overseeing U.S. policy in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. He works closely with his counterparts in foreign governments and throughout the U.S. federal government. He advises President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough, and Homeland Security Advisor John Brennan. A foreign policy veteran with more than 20 years of experience, Talwar previously served as the chief Middle East adviser to Vice President Biden during the latter's tenure on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. As a chief interlocutor with top government officials throughout the Middle East, Talwar played a prominent role in the Iraq War debate and in the ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention in the Senate. Previously, he served in the Clinton administration on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and worked as a foreign policy adviser in the House of Representatives. He holds a master's degree from Columbia University and a bachelor's degree from Cornell University.

**Ambassador James Dobbins** is the director of the RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center. He has held State Department and White House posts, including Assis-

tant Secretary of State for Europe, Special Assistant to the President, Special Adviser to the President, Secretary of State for the Balkans, and Ambassador to the European Community. Dobbins has had numerous crisis management and diplomatic troubleshooting assignments as the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations' special envoy for Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia. His past diplomatic assignments include the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia, the American-led multilateral intervention in Haiti, the stabilization and reconstruction of Bosnia, and the NATO intervention in Kosovo. In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, he was named as the George W. Bush administration's representative to the Afghan opposition with the task of putting together and installing a broadly based successor to the Taliban regime. He represented the United States at the Bonn Conference that established the new Afghan government, and, on December 16, 2001, he raised the flag over the newly reopened U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

**Ambassador Charles Ries** is a senior fellow at the RAND Corporation and director of the Center for Middle East Public Policy. He most recently served as the Minister for Economic Affairs and Coordinator for Economic Transition in Iraq at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, where he was responsible for oversight and coordination of assistance and economic policy initiatives. Between December 2004 and June 2007, Ries served as U.S. Ambassador to Greece. He was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs between April 2000 and June 2004. In earlier assignments with the U.S. Department of State, Ries was the Minister Counselor for Economic Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in London (1996–2000) and Minister Counselor for Economic Affairs at the U.S. Mission to the European Union (1992–1996). He served as Deputy Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for North American Affairs (1990–1992) and as a member of the North American Free Trade Agreement negotiating team. After joining the Foreign Service in 1977, he served as a special assistant and executive assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, in the Energy Policy Office, in the Office of the Counselor of the Department, and at U.S. Embassies in Ankara and Santo Domingo. Ries is the recipient of the State Department's Cordell Hull Award for Senior Economic Officers, the Distinguished Honor Award, the Presidential Meritorious Service Award, and several Superior Honor Awards. For his service in Iraq, he was also awarded the Department of the Army's Outstanding Civil Service Medal. Ries earned his M.A. and B.A. in international affairs from Johns Hopkins University.

**Ambassador David L. Aaron** is a senior fellow at the RAND Corporation. He formerly served on the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute Board of Overseers and as director of the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy. He is a former Deputy National Security Advisor, Ambassador to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade, and Special White House Envoy for Cryptography. His other government positions included Foreign Service assignments to NATO, the United Nations, and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. He served on the staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee and was the National Security Council staff member responsible for nuclear strategy and arms control. Aaron also worked in the private sector as an investment banker and adviser to a Washington, D.C., law firm. He has written three novels published in ten languages, and he wrote the Public Broadcasting Service special titled "The Lessons of the Gulf War." His most recent monograph is *In Their Own Words: Voices of Jihad*. Aaron received his B.A. and L.L.D. from Occidental College and his M.P.A. from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.



**Kenneth Pollack** is an expert on national security, military affairs, and the Persian Gulf. He was Director for Persian Gulf affairs at the National Security Council. He also spent seven years in the Central Intelligence Agency as a Persian Gulf military analyst. He is the author of *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East*. His past positions include Director of Research, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution; Director for National Security Studies, Council on Foreign Relations (2001–2002); Director for Persian Gulf Affairs, National Security Council (1999–2001); Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs, National Security Council (1995–1996); senior research professor, National Defense University (1998–1999, 2001); Iran-Iraq military analyst, Central Intelligence Agency (1988–1995).

**Frederic Wehrey** is a senior policy analyst with the RAND Corporation and an adjunct professor of security studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. His research at RAND has focused on Persian Gulf security and the politics of the Arabian Peninsula. His RAND monographs include *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After the Iraq War* (2010), *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (2009), and *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (2009). His articles have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *Survival*, *The Chicago Journal of International Law*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, and the *Arab Reform Bulletin*. Before joining RAND in 2005, he served as an active-duty U.S. Air Force officer for ten years, with tours in Turkey and Iraq and on the Joint Staff. He continues to serve in the U.S. Air Force Reserve as an air attaché, with recent tours in East Africa and in Libya. He holds a B.A. in history from Occidental College and an M.A. in Near Eastern studies from Princeton University. He is currently a doctoral candidate in international relations at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford.



## Panel One: The Arab Spring—Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change

---

### Presentations

The panel discussions began with an analysis of the recent uprisings throughout the Middle East. Although conventional lexicons now refer to this phenomenon as the *Arab Spring*, several speakers throughout the day began to question whether the phrase *Winter of Arab Discontent* would be a more accurate label. Topics of discussion largely focused on the following questions: What caused the revolutions, and to what extent were the motivations the same or different in each case? What will be the attitudes of the new regimes toward the United States and its security interests? What U.S. policies and strategies will have to be adjusted, particularly those related to fighting terrorism? What should U.S. policy be toward the nations whose revolutions fail or drift back into authoritarianism?

The moderator introduced the panel's overall topic by referencing former RAND analyst Francis Fukuyama and his book *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama's thesis in that seminal work is that, with the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War, the history of competing ideologies ended, with only liberal democracy left standing. Although this judgment may have been somewhat premature, much of the world has since democratized, the Middle East being the only region to have escaped this trend. Prior to 1989, many revolutions had ended badly, the French, Russian and Iranian revolutions being prime examples. Since the end of the Cold War, however, most popular uprisings had produced better governments than those they replaced. Was the Middle East now joining this otherwise global trend toward democratic government, or would it remain the outlier?

The first speaker examined the implications of the Arab Spring for the states in the Persian Gulf region. He asked whether the momentous events of the past few months warrant a fundamental rethinking of longstanding assumptions about Gulf security—specifically, the notion that the Gulf is immune to the ideological convulsions that have affected other parts of the region. He began by explaining that, although the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt helped trigger unrest in the Gulf, the roots of these revolutions were ultimately local and specific to the Gulf context. In the region writ large, the causes of the unrest stem from the “perfect storm” created by a population with a low median age, flagging gross domestic product rates, rising food prices, and the proliferation of social media. In the Gulf, the stalling or reversal of political reforms that began in at the turn of the century has caused widespread disenchantment. On top of that, there are mounting sectarian tensions in the Gulf, which regimes use as a justification to quell popular discontent. Thus, the signs of malaise were growing in the Gulf even before the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt.

The speaker cited the example of Bahrain, where the main Shia voting bloc participated in parliamentary elections in 2006 but failed to deliver meaningful reforms for its constituents, leading to growing frustration among the Shia population. Even in Kuwait—a supposed bastion of liberalism in the Gulf—there was rising friction between a parliamentary opposition dominated by Sunni tribes on the one hand and, on the other, a divided monarchy that was perceived as being too friendly to the Shia. In December 2010, the government cracked down on a gathering of parliamentarians and kicked al-Jazeera out of the country, leading some commentators to wonder whether the country was returning to the “bad old days” of the 1980s. Thus, even before the effects of revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt spread across the region, the worrisome signs of stress in the Gulf were becoming apparent.

But now, the speaker asserted, the momentum has mostly come to a halt. Although petition campaigns on Facebook and Twitter have been a very significant vehicle for expressing dissent, and although and new youth groups and political parties have formed, most regimes have weathered the storm. For example, Saudi Arabia’s “day of rage” petered out because the regime was able to frame it as a Shia uprising and effectively quash it.

The speaker then explained that most regimes now are attempting to shield their countries from spreading social discontent via a classic buying-off strategy. King Abdallah in Saudi Arabia earmarked \$35 billion to placate potential dissent in Saudi Arabia. In Bahrain and Kuwait, there are similar subsidy efforts. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole is working on a sort of Marshall Plan package to buttress the regimes of Bahrain and Oman. The real question is whether these measures are sufficient to promote long-term stability and development or whether they are simply a rearrangement of the deck chairs on the Titanic. After all, the Gulf has a long history of enacting political reforms that are actually cosmetic in nature and do little to implement real accountability and popular participation. Another tactic that the Gulf regimes have employed to distract attention from the domestic roots of their countries’ unrest has been to hype the Iran threat as a sort of bogeyman. They want the United States’ focus to be primarily on Iran and not on the regimes’ domestic political affairs. But, the speaker asserted, the real fear in the region is of constitutionalism. Monarchies are afraid of a slippery slope of reform that ultimately results in the crown’s demise.

Is there new consensus in the Gulf? The speaker explained that some developments in the wake of the Arab Spring do suggest that cooperation and consensus on internal security are emerging. For example, the GCC’s approval of the so-called Marshall Plan demonstrates some unity. But many enduring factors will prevent the GCC from achieving real, workable unity. These include the smaller Gulf states’ chronic resentment of Saudi dominance, the preference for Qatar and Oman to “go-it-alone,” and each state’s domestic politics. An example of the obstacle presented by domestic politics is the parliamentary opposition in Kuwait that restricted that state’s contribution to the deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force into Bahrain.

One worrisome effect of the Arab Spring is Saudi Arabia’s so-called diplomatic counter-revolution—Riyadh’s “new” activism aimed at rolling back reform in the region—which may cause friction between Riyadh and Washington. The speaker noted that we have seen this activism and friction before: after the 1979 revolution, after 2001, and after the Second Lebanon War in 2006. In each case, Saudi policy had destabilizing side effects—namely, rising sectarian tensions and the growth of Salafi-jihadism.

The second speaker indicated that he thought that Fukuyama’s thesis on the end of history was exactly right. There is no ideological alternative to representative democracy, welfare

capitalism, and market economies except in the Middle East, where Islam has been embraced as the alternative ideological paradigm to democratic market capitalism. Ultimately, the direction taken by the Islamic world after these uprisings is going to be determined by the extent to which people who think Islam is the solution can find consensus with those who want democracy.

The speaker admitted that, if you had asked him six months ago whether we would have seen the same type of Arab authoritarianism six months down the road, he would have said yes. The Arab Spring was an unforeseeable phenomenon. But he believes the term *Winter of Arab Discontent* is more accurate than *Arab Spring*. Revolutionary hotspots have thus far correlated with areas of substantial economic discontent. Areas of the Middle East with substantial cash revenues and hydrocarbon wealth have been mostly immune. Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia saw significantly less upheaval in 2011 than the rest of the Arab world. The exception was Libya, where leader Muammar Qaddafi simply did not spend his money wisely. Overall, the Gulf region was the least affected by the Winter of Arab Discontent.

The strategic element in all of this is Saudi Arabia's reassertion of its influence in the region. To achieve its counter-revolution, the Saudi regime is playing the sectarian card, which could open the door to more instability and regional tension. An atmosphere of sectarianism contributes to the possibility that Salafi-jihadism will be revived, and it could provoke further unrest in the region.

The second speaker closed by remarking that unstable allies are not worth having. Given the poor prospects for long-term stability in Bahrain, he proposed that U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) relocate the 5th Naval Fleet away from Manama.

The third speaker concentrated on the effect of the Arab uprisings on dynamics within Iran. He pointed out that an individual living in Iran right now might perceive the regime to be in complete control. But, if one compares Iran with Egypt and Tunisia using objective metrics, Iran is doing much worse than those countries in the areas of corruption, economic malaise, and repression.

So, how is Iran distinct from Tunisia and Egypt, and why is revolution unlikely to spread to Iran any time soon? The panelist identified five factors. First, regimes that are anti-American, such as Iran's, have an advantage in that there is no ceiling in terms of the violence they can inflict on the population. Hosni Mubarak was subject to the whims of U.S. politics and public opinion, but Iran's regime is not. Second, although the Iranian regime is not popular, the support it receives runs very deep. There are many individuals in Iran who are willing to kill and die for the regime. Third, in Tunisia and Egypt, the military put national interests ahead of the regime's interest. However, if the regime in Iran collapsed, it would result in the demise of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. The military therefore has an inherent interest in seeing the regime survive. Fourth, the uprisings in Iran have coherent leadership but no common cause. The opposition merely talks in general about reforming the system, which is a difficult cause to take to the streets with any gusto. Lastly, the increased risk premium of oil prices has given a substantial influx of cash to Tehran in the short term.

Despite these factors, the speaker explained how the causes and conditions that produced uprisings throughout the Arab world do very much exist in Iran. But, he said, a maxim used by Shimon Peres is apt to the situation: "The good news is there is light at the end of the tunnel; the bad news is there is no tunnel." Currently, the opposition has no coherent tactic or strategy for bringing down the Iranian regime. Tactically, the speaker pointed out, the main lesson that

the Iranian opposition can draw from Tahrir Square is that it should “stay in the square.” On June 15, 2009, the largest day of protest in Iran, three million people took to the streets. The mistake they made was to go home at the end of the day. Contrast that with Tahrir, where protestors took over the square and stayed. Tactically, once a revolutionary movement has the streets, it should not leave.

The speaker closed by discussing how the United States can play a role in support of change in Iran. Currently, the political situation in Iran is high risk and low reward. Individuals risk their lives by participating in revolutionary activity, but it can take many months—even years—for an uprising to be successful. Therefore, policymakers need to find ways to switch the dynamics, make the situation in Iran low risk and high reward. This can be done in the technological realm. Currently, the Iranian regime uses its monopoly over information and communication to suppress dissent. The United States should therefore focus on ways of breaking both the Iranian regime’s stranglehold over the Internet and its embargo on information and communication.

## Questions and Answers

The first question asked concerned whether the Arab Spring has been to the benefit of Iran or to the United States. Responses were primarily of the “none of the above” variety. Panelists indicated that the Middle East would become more multipolar, with Turkey becoming a greater player. Iran could be hurt by the fall of the Assad regime in Syria; Iran’s strength is greatest when there are weak governments that allow foreign influence and where groups are looking for outside support. To the extent that more democracy emerges, the Iranians lose, and the Iranian model becomes less appealing. But, the uprisings will hurt the United States’ ability to get what it wants, because an increase in the number of democracies will also result in an increase in the number of Arab countries whose foreign policy is governed by public opinion. Egypt’s relationship with Iran is also likely to improve, which will be a net gain for Iran at the expense of the United States.

An attendee asked how Arab Shia could advance their own interests while simultaneously proving they are not puppets of the Iranians. In response, panelists explained that the vast majority of Shia do so every day. There are always going to be some elements of the Shia community that look to Iran for political inspiration. But they are a minority. Most Shia just want equal rights as citizens. They try to achieve those rights by participating in elections and using the vocabulary of nationalism and constitutionalism. Unfortunately, radical voices often get all the attention.

Another participant then pressed one of the speakers regarding the latter’s proposal to shutter the CENTCOM offices in Bahrain. The questioner wondered how much leverage the United States would retain in Bahrain if CENTCOM were to leave. The speaker responded that he did not care specifically about leverage in Bahrain but rather about overall U.S. influence in the region. The United States would still be committed to protecting Bahrain, whether or not CENTCOM is based there. The issue is not getting caught up in a conflict within Bahrain, which could damage U.S. standing in the Gulf.

A participant asked whether Iran should be concerned about the opinions of other governmental leaders. The answer was “not really.” Arabs view the Green Movement cynically.

They believe it was exaggerated by the U.S. media and that the Iranian regime was not as unpopular as the press portrayed it.

The final question concerned whether the Saudis and the Americans have different stakes in how the Arab Spring pans out. The speakers responded by explaining that Riyadh and Washington have very different views about what the ideal domestic political arrangements in Arab states look like. But that does not mean much to the bilateral relationship, except in the countries that Saudi Arabia sees as its sphere of influence, primarily Bahrain and Yemen. Outside of that, although they have clout, the Saudis do not really make a big effort to involve themselves in regional affairs. Geopolitics is going to carry the day. Both the Americans and the Saudis are worried about the Iranian threat. Although relations between Riyadh and Washington have soured recently, we have seen this turbulence before (i.e., after 9/11), yet the partnership has endured.





## Panel Two: The Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League Political Unity—Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

---

### Presentations

This panel explored the subject of political unity in the GCC and the Arab League and its implications for U.S. foreign policy. Panelists addressed the following topics: What are the implications of perceived Arab unity in the Arab League endorsement of the Libyan no-fly zone and of GCC unity in the deployment of security forces to Bahrain? What are the prospects for long-term Arab unity? What is the likelihood that the GCC will evolve into a real common-defense organization? The moderator began the discussion by recounting an old Oldsmobile commercial that declared that the new generation of Olds was “not your father’s Oldsmobile.” That slogan can be applied to status quo events in the Middle East as well, he said: This is not your father’s GCC, and this is not your father’s Arab League.

We are seeing what seems to be the beginning of Arab unity, the first speaker opined. There has been collective action against Libya, active diplomacy on Yemen, and cooperation on the deployment of GCC troops to Bahrain. On the surface, we seem to be on the brink of a sea change within the GCC, one that may result in a GCC that has teeth, is better integrated, is not reliant on the United States, and is better able to deter Iran.

However, this apparent consensus is, ultimately, illusory. Underneath the surface, there is deep anxiety within the GCC. Indeed, much of the GCC’s new activism is the product of anxiety rather than of a new sense of empowerment. There are unprecedented doubts about the role of the United States in the region. The GCC states are looking for alternatives, and their actions can be seen as largely an effort to supplement U.S. forces, although not to supplant them. Indeed, the GCC itself was born from anxiety, created because Saudi Arabia was nervous about Iran and because smaller Gulf states were worried about Saudi Arabia. And it is a largely defensive, rather than offensive, organization.

The speaker argued that the GCC’s consensus on Libya was really the result of the deep hatred that Qaddafi provoked rather than any new shift in Gulf cooperation. It was not about principles; it was about personalities. It was about Qaddafi not being polite in an area of the world where politeness really matters. In Yemen, it was about coming together for diplomatic action. So, although there is unity, the GCC is not pursuing an independent ability to operate and fight. It is actually difficult to differentiate the GCC’s strategy from the Saudi strategy. Rather than taking the traditional path of doling out subsidies, the Saudis are working within the GCC framework.

The speaker then explained how the GCC views the United States. The United States has committed itself to defending GCC states against external threats, and, because the GCC felt

that the uprisings in Bahrain were an external threat driven by Iran, it expected U.S. support. The United States, however, labeled the uprising a domestic issue and claimed that they were “not our problem.” Therefore, there is a broad perception in the GCC that the United States is stupid and naïve and that it is missing the Iranian hand in the region’s problems. In the GCC’s view, the United States is being outplayed in country after country throughout the region. It perceives that Washington misplayed the situation in Cairo and threw a long-term ally “under the bus.” In the case of Iran, there is a sense among the GCC members that the United States is foolishly chasing a diplomatic settlement. Even in the cases of Iraq and Israel, the GCC believes U.S. policy is faltering.

The speaker next discussed the sense of vulnerability in the GCC brought on by the uncertainties surrounding Egypt. Previously, Cairo was the center of gravity of the Arab world. Now, nobody has any sense of what direction Egypt will take in the next three years. The GCC leadership is particularly nervous about the Muslim Brotherhood and would prefer a reversion to the Egypt of the past. Given these realities, where does the GCC go from here? Prince Faisal has suggested that it could remake itself into something similar to the European Union. But what it is really doing is more analogous to turning itself into a “monarchy club.” Militarily, the GCC is trying extremely hard to obtain U.S. support because it cannot currently operate without strong U.S. assistance. However, given evidence that suggests that U.S. influence may be waning, the GCC is not going to count on indefinite support from the United States. Thus, rather than experiencing a new burst of self-confidence, the GCC is experiencing a new burst of anxiety. It is seeking a new diplomatic and political role for itself in the region, and its key target is no longer intimidating Iran but rather figuring out how it can shape what the United States does. Whether its power is waxing or waning, the United States continues to be the strongest power in the Gulf.

The second speaker began by explaining that the GCC states resort to “omnibalancing” to ensure that their foreign policies confront both external and domestic threats. This serves as a natural inducement to pursue more-pragmatic policies that are likely to enhance regime security rather than to pursue overtly doctrinal or one-sided policies that may inflame domestic or regional tensions. Despite serious apprehensions and deep-seated suspicions of both Iran and Iraq, the GCC states, both collectively and individually, have pursued largely pragmatic policies toward their northern neighbors. The Arab Spring is unlikely to change the underlying premises of these relationships.

Nonetheless, the speaker noted, the Arab Spring has provided an opening both for the GCC as a group and for Saudi Arabia, a long-time aspiring leader of the Arab world, to try to expand their regional influence and global profile. An already weakened Arab state system, with a gradually rehabilitated Egypt under Mubarak’s leadership, has been once again weakened by the wave of rebellions sweeping across the region. The best defense being an offense, Saudi Arabia has sought to seize the initiative, not only containing the rebellion close to its shores in Bahrain but also actually leading a region-wide counter-revolution. The Kingdom’s extension of \$4 billion to Egypt to shore up the post-Mubarak state is more than an act of altruism; it is part of a calculated strategy to buy influence and ensure prominence.

The last speaker discussed CENTCOM’s interests and the recent multilateral unity within the GCC and the Arab League. Discussing whether this unity represents a long-term change and a new security structure that does not need the United States, he decided that it does not, and that these entities are not yet independent of the United States. But they are seeking greater unity because they believe that, by breaking what the speaker called the “1979

compact,” the United States has become a less reliable security partner. (The “1979 compact” refers to the fact that, in return for permission to base U.S. forces in the region, the United States agreed to protect these regimes from external threats—i.e., from the Soviet Union, Iran, and Iraq—and make only token nudges for political reform.)

Some countries perceive the United States to be in a decline, with its flagging economy and shift toward isolationism. The GCC may be reaching a state of “enlightened self-interest,” concluding that, if the United States is unwilling to protect Arab rulers from the “Arab street,” it will also be unwilling to protect those regimes from Iran.

It is essential for the United States to keep a strong military presence in the region, and, according to the speaker, this is why recent events throughout the Middle East are so disconcerting—they are making it easier for Iran to dislodge the United States’ regional basing structure. And it will become frighteningly more significant if or when Tehran resorts to a policy of nuclear coercion. A more apocalyptic scenario than an Iranian attack on Tel Aviv would emerge if Iran, using its nuclear capability as a trump card, pressured Arab rulers to ask the United States to leave the region. Nothing short of a nuclear deterrence policy will prevent Iran from taking this course of action. Ultimately, the United States should not assume that its invitation to remain in the region is permanent, and it needs to rebuild relationships and trust with regimes throughout the Middle East in order to maintain both its visible commitment to deterring Iran and the credibility of the U.S. declaratory nuclear policy. It is CENTCOM that is the tip of the spear for rebuilding that trust. CENTCOM is the persistent face of U.S. leadership in the region and the only credible force that can maintain security in the Gulf.

## Questions and Answers

A participant queried the speakers about the prospects for integrating Iraq into the GCC. In response, the moderator indicated that it would be difficult due to the impact of oil politics. The most significant threat to Saudi Arabia’s global oil position is the emergence of an increase in Iraq’s oil production, and Baghdad has been consistently siding with Tehran on the issue of quotas.

Another question related to the status of NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative framework. One speaker speculated that, in the past, NATO was attempting to gain a greater foothold in the Middle East but that NATO’s interest in doing so has waned as its plate has filled up with other issues.

Next, an attendee asked whether Egypt might be poised for a comeback and end up having more influence in the Middle East than the GCC, especially since succession in Saudi Arabia could result in the decline of Riyadh’s influence in the GCC. Secondly, the attendee asked for the panelists’ thoughts on the likelihood of bringing Morocco into the GCC. Panelists were cautious about making predictions but indicated that they are more uncertain about Egypt’s future path than Saudi Arabia’s. Morocco, they said, is a country that needs to find jobs for tens of millions of people. If the GCC states will not let Moroccans enter their countries to work, it is not clear how Morocco will fit into the GCC. Jordan is actually a much more logical fit because its military has better capabilities than the Moroccan military. The GCC definitely wants to help Morocco because doing so would strengthen a fellow monarchy, but that is not the same as wanting Morocco to join.

Lastly, a participant emphasized the importance of acknowledging how problematic CENTCOM's role in the region is. Military-to-military relations are typically CENTCOM's focus, but the region is changing, and CENTCOM's large presence and budget distorts the perception of U.S. policy and interests by overrepresenting the military at the expense of the Department of State and the interagency community. Panelists responded that nobody wants a greater role for the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, and the interagency community more than CENTCOM does. The current imbalance in roles is not a situation that CENTCOM particularly desires.

## Panel Three: Iran in the Gulf—Defining the Challenge and the Arab Response

---

### Presentations

During the third panel, the speakers discussed the Iranian question, concentrating on the following themes: How has Iran reacted to the Arab Spring? What lessons is it learning? What actions has it taken? How has the Arab world responded to Iran's actions? Has Iran gained or lost political stature? Will the removal of Mubarak in Egypt redress the regional balance between Iran and the Arabs? Do Iran's Arab neighbors see Iran any differently after the Arab Spring? Are the Arab states more or less concerned about Iran's hegemonic ambitions and nuclear program?

The moderator set the stage by explaining that recent U.S. policies in the Middle East for dealing with Arab uprisings have exacerbated Arab concerns about the credibility of the U.S. security commitments in the region. This doubt has been magnified as the United States continues to withdraw troops from the region. Riyadh was vexed by how Washington dropped Mubarak so quickly, and Saudi Arabia has begun to declare that it is better off with an independent foreign policy. Although there is a perception of diminishing U.S. interest in the region, senior American officials think that the Iranian nuclear program requires a continuing focus on and presence in the region. The challenge is making this stance clear. Current U.S. declaratory deterrence policy favors a conventional response to a nuclear attack on U.S. partners. This response will need to be made more robust. Otherwise, U.S. partners will have a growing incentive to accommodate Iran, develop their own nuclear weapons, or both.

Leading off his presentation with Iranian perceptions of the Arab Spring, the first speaker outlined how the leadership in Tehran claimed that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 inspired the uprisings. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps proclaimed the Arab Spring to be the beginning of the end of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. These perceptions are rooted in Iran's view of itself as an ascendant power. And, because the Supreme Leader is surrounded by sycophants, it is likely that the Iranian leadership actually believes its own rhetoric. This rhetoric is also reflected in Iranian policy. Iran is attempting to use the fall of Mubarak to reshape the region, as evidenced by the recent passage of Iranian warships through the Suez Canal. And, Iran sees Bahrain as a vulnerability in the Saudi-U.S. security regime, as it is a lynchpin for both Saudi and U.S. influence in the region.

The speaker then examined whether Iran actually has any real traction in the Middle East. Its power is currently very limited in the Middle East and North Africa. But improving

relations with Tehran would be a good move on Cairo's part. Iran's most significant ally, Syria, is currently in great danger. Iran has invested billions of dollars in the Syrian economy and military, which does make Iran a very powerful actor in the Levant. If the Israeli-Palestinian peace process fails, that may be good for Iran, but Iranian influence over Hamas is often overstated. Hamas is not under the complete control of Tehran, and although Hamas relies on Iranian funding, the two do not share a strong political or ideological affinity. In the Persian Gulf, Iranian influence may grow if Bahraini Shia feel disenfranchised and turn to Iran, but that has not happened so far.

Discussing Iran's internal problems, the speaker stated that the regime continues to face popular dissatisfaction, unemployment, corruption, crime, and the effects of sanctions. But, more critically, Iran is suffering from leadership fissures. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been openly challenging the clergy and the Supreme Leader. Compared with the Arab Spring, these internal divisions are considerably more crucial to the direction of the Iranian regime. Furthermore, the nuclear crisis within Iran has been immune to the Arab Spring. U.S. sanctions have not stopped progress on the nuclear program, and Tehran actually views the Arab Spring as a distraction for Washington and an opportunity to continue the Iranian nuclear program unimpeded.

The second speaker began by averring that the Winter of Arab Discontent has demonstrated that Iran's influence is much more limited than some assumed six months ago. Iran does not actually shape events; it only benefits from them if it is well positioned. Otherwise, it can be hurt by regional events.

The speaker split his analysis of Arab responses to the perceived Iranian response into two dichotomies: Gulf countries and non-Gulf countries, and official responses and unofficial responses. According to the speaker, non-Gulf Arabs would tell you that Iran is irrelevant to events that unfold in the region. According to a recent Gallup poll, he said, only 1 percent of Egyptians reported looking to Iran as a model, and only 25 percent wanted closer relations with Iran. Egyptian newspapers have had absolutely nothing positive to say about Iran. And, in Syria, a significant segment of the population associates Iran and Hezbollah with oppression. Iran's support of Syria has tainted its image in the region. A multitude of YouTube videos coming out of Syria "trash" Hezbollah and Iran, for example.

In Gulf countries, the speaker explained, a normal citizen in the region is likely to be suffering from confusion and panic. To make sense of the situation, the public and the governments commonly resort to identity politics, which has increased sectarianism in the Gulf. Additionally, some Gulf citizens are trying to make sense of Iran's response to the Arab Spring by subscribing to conspiracy theories, claiming that Zionists, Crusaders, and Persians are working together or even that the Israelis, the Americans, and the Persians are working together. Gulf countries also perceive that they are fighting Iran in Bahrain. At the official level, non-Gulf Arab countries view Iran as an annoyance and a distraction. They see Iran as very opportunistic and as an unhelpful player in the region. Although they will want more strategic relations with Iran in the future, Tehran must first get its own house in order. Unofficially, non-Gulf Arab countries believe that Iran provides a degree of legitimacy to small proxy groups that cannot be ignored.

The last speaker focused specifically on the Iranian reaction to events within Bahrain. The Supreme Leader referred to the Arab Spring uprisings as a new Islamic awakening, but his reaction was quite different when it came to Bahrain. Tehran's response to Bahrain was surprisingly tepid; it mostly just churned out propaganda. In the media, the Iranian leadership



tried to rationalize Iran's differentiated response to the uprisings in Egypt and Bahrain, pointing out that although Iran had poor relations with Egypt, it had friendly ties to the Bahraini government and therefore had to be more cautious. Additionally, Tehran did not want to turn an Islamic movement into a sectarian Shia movement, and, if it meddled in Bahrain's affairs, it would be perceived as doing so just to support the Shia minority. But this policy turned out to be problematic for Tehran, as Iran has long portrayed itself as the protector of the Shia community. When the Saudis sent troops to Bahrain to crack down on demonstrators, Iran kept silent, exposing its inability to react in a meaningful way and thereby damaging its image. The speaker noted that Shia throughout the region are beginning to question Iran's ability to protect them.

The moderator concluded the presentations by offering further comment on Iran's nuclear program. He noted that Iran is located in a highly earthquake-prone area and that the recent Japanese tragedy underscores the crucial importance of rigorous nuclear safety standards. However, Iran has not signed the International Atomic Energy Agency's Nuclear Safety Convention. There is a real possibility that Iran's nuclear program could pose a serious threat to its neighbors, quite apart from any nuclear weapon activities.

## Questions and Answers

A participant asked for the speakers' thoughts on the strategic expansion of the GCC. One panelist explained that he was skeptical of the strategic implications of expanding the GCC. What is interesting is that the citizens of the GCC states do not want to include Morocco and Jordan. The Gulf states are reacting to the Iranian threat by unifying, and they cannot both unify and expand at the same time.

The next participant stated that the GCC's invitation to Jordan and Morocco is one of the most interesting developments to come out of recent events. He noted that, if Jordan and Morocco joined the GCC, there would be significant economic benefits to their governments and, potentially, their populations. Also, the Jordanian armed forces are very good, and their special operations forces could be a significant military asset for the GCC. These factors point toward a larger geostrategic shift that could have a profound effect on the region.

One panelist responded that much of this apparent or potential shift is due to a growing fear of Iran among the Gulf states. The GCC's reactions will ultimately depend on the direction of the Iranian nuclear program. It is not clear that any of the GCC states would actually acquire their own nuclear program, but a lot of their sense of uncertainty about their security has to do with anxieties about the United States becoming a less reliable partner. On the other hand, the Arab side usually seems to overrate Iranian capabilities.

One participant opined that, in all likelihood, we are overreacting to the alarms being sounded at the elite level among GCC states. When things settle down, geopolitical realities will once again push Washington and Riyadh back together. Many events in the past have soured relations, but the two nations have always come back together and focused on the strategic partnership.





## Panel Four: Gulf Militaries and Political Change

---

### Presentations

During the final panel, speakers concentrated on several questions relating to Gulf militaries and political change. For example, what is the role of Gulf security forces in countering external threats (e.g., from Iran) and internal threats (e.g., from Iranian subversion, civil unrest, terrorism, and al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula)? What changes are needed to confront these issues collectively? What are the shared interests between the U.S. and Gulf militaries? What opportunities exist to capitalize on these shared equities?

Beginning the conversation, the moderator emphasized the value of applying the tools of academia to the problems of policy. He indicated that one thing academics have taught us is the importance of the military when analyzing revolutions. A movement will not result in a successful revolution unless the state loses the capacity to use violence.

The first speaker discussed the main dimensions of civil-military relations during a period of change. The internal situations in the Gulf states reflect a small gap between the military and the ruling establishment, and the military structure plays a substantial role in what occurs on the street. For Gulf countries, one of the main threats confronting the state security forces is the large pockets of foreign populations within the borders of a number of countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's National Guard is deeply loyal to the royal family and serves as the vanguard of the regime's stability and sustainability. Now, Arab militaries are being used in almost an internal counterinsurgency capacity because of rising sectarianism. Paramilitary police forces are being used for crowd control and are playing security roles that are outside of the normal parameters of their mission.

According to the speaker, international relationships are another important dimension—specifically, the centrality of U.S. arms sales. Even when there appears to be a gap in relations, the United States still remains the principle guarantor of regional security. Although it may be tempting to think that the situation in the Gulf has completely changed, Gulf countries lack the capacity to project force, and the procurement path for improving indigenous defense capabilities is very long. The economic dimension can be seen in the reality that GCC expansion is, in part, tied to whether including a new country will mean greater economic security. The speaker concluded by stating that it is more likely that the changing relationships reflect a cycle of U.S. influence rather than a long-term rise or decline. Events across the region have not truly translated into meaningful change for Gulf militaries and regimes.

Stating that the way in which Arabs interact with each other is distinct from how American personnel interact with Arabs, the second speaker reported that, while living and traveling in the Gulf, he mostly talked with three categories of people in the region. The first believe that

there is a grand conspiracy: that the United States, Iran, and everyone else is against them. The second admits it is not a conspiracy but asserts that U.S. foreign policy is failing miserably and thereby opened the way for Iran to make a huge and strong offensive push for influence. The third believes the United States is a superpower that cares only for its own interests and that is willing to turn toward Iran and against the Arabs even if doing so would benefit the United States in only a small way. These attitudes have an influence on the militaries in Gulf countries.

The speaker pointed out that some Gulf nations have their own polls used to identify their citizens' top concerns and priorities. The results indicate that the top concerns are the number of foreigners in their home country and the loss of their national identity, followed by increases in the cost of living and job security. Lowest on the list of concerns are human rights and national security. The fact that human rights are of low concern is definitely positive, but the negative aspect is that citizens do not see eye to eye with the regimes that want to fund expensive defense programs. How, then, will regimes be able to tell their people, "There is a threat out there called Iran, and we have to buy a lot of weapons and be prepared for it?"

On the issue of expanding the GCC to include Jordan and Morocco, the speaker noted that a large number of Moroccan air force officers work for the GCC and that Jordan is recognized as having top-notch special operations forces. The GCC does see substantial military benefits in the prospect of these two countries joining. But there is also hesitation: If Morocco and Jordan joined, the GCC could have to take on the burden of those two countries' problems (in the western Sahara and with Israel, respectively).

Declining Gulf confidence in the West and the United States in particular was another trend the speaker discussed. Gulf militaries are beginning to look more toward the East. They are admiring the Chinese and Indian militaries, and, for regional events, Gulf militaries are increasingly asking for Chinese or Indian military speakers. Some GCC countries see a war with Iran as inevitable. Others believe that war can and should be prevented. Unfortunately, there is no consensus among the GCC states on what approach to take with Iran.

In conclusion, the second speaker claimed that the notion of NATO serving as a reliable partner for the GCC has all but disappeared. For the first time, the GCC is beginning to see working with NATO as counterproductive. And, as a result, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative is all but dead.

The third speaker began by discussing security assistance, and he noted the need for caution when using this term. Thinking of security assistance as purely aid is misleading; the term is much broader. Gulf countries think of the United States as a vendor of goods but not as the only such vendor. Gulf countries will do some "comparison shopping" and will find political benefits from working with multiple countries. They will make sure that they have hedged their bets. So, the United States needs to make sure that it is valued and capable, and it must anticipate that a more complex mix of actors will move into the picture.

The speaker declared military-to-military relations between the United States and the Gulf countries to be stable despite the Arab Spring. These relationships are rooted in long-term partnerships that are based on decisions made decades ago. They are not whimsical or superficial. There are investments at stake, and relationships are therefore not easily turned around, even if the relationships have, at the top-most level, shifted. Also, there is a desire in most Gulf militaries to be nonpolitical. We should not assume that these militaries are any different from the Egyptian military, whose interests were separate from those of the ruling party. Additionally, the threat of Iran is a "constant"—a sort of fallback threat against the variable changes the Arab Spring has produced.

Making two final points, the speaker asserted that the United States should avoid making the Gulf an outlier in its promotion of political and security reform. At a minimum, the United States has to start discussing security sector reform with its Gulf partners. If the United States remains silent on security sector reform in the Gulf, it will appear as if it is effectively dividing the region between the oil-rich Gulf and the rest, which could lead to charges of hypocrisy and double standards. And, lastly, a debate about CENTCOM's long-term presence in Bahrain is necessary. Is it really in the U.S. interest to be associated with a country with such a tarnished human rights record?

The moderator wrapped up the panel discussion by suggesting that it is tough to imagine the Gulf militaries following the path of the Egyptian military. The Gulf militaries do not appear to have the same set of incentives as the Egyptian military. However, we also have to remember that we were not able to predict the Egyptian military's actions either. The moderator surmised that all of these militaries are untried in every sense of the word. He postulated that the regimes themselves probably have questions about the reliability of their own militaries and are thinking, "Mubarak was confident that this would not happen to him; should I be confident or worried?" The Gulf countries may actually decide to further politicize their militaries to mitigate these concerns, and they may also elect to become more involved in repressive activities. This will make it harder for the United States to cooperate with them.

## Questions and Answers

An attendee asked the panelists to provide a scenario or example of the GCC states taking firm military action against Iran. A panelist cited a recent example from Bahrain's unrest. When the Iranians sent a flotilla of aid to Bahrain, the GCC warned Iran that the flotilla would be opposed militarily if it entered Bahraini waters.

Another attendee wondered whether we are really seeing a new military confidence emerge among the GCC members. They have a lot of hardware, but does that really translate into a willingness to fight in a regional conflict, potentially against Iran? One panelist said yes, they are willing; discussions with members of GCC forces that are supporting the rebels in Libya suggest that the GCC is gaining new confidence and capability. Another panelist urged caution, saying that there are no indicators that a regional conflict is developing with Iran. The third speaker stated there is nothing structurally he can see that would support a claim that the Gulf militaries could sustain a large military conflict on their own.

In the event's final question, one participant asked why there is such a high number of foreign nationals participating in GCC countries' military apparatuses and stated that he thought that the intervention in Bahrain was perhaps not the ideal example of a more aggressive GCC. Regarding expatriate participation, a panelist pointed out that certain nationalities are more accepted within the Gulf than others. These populations might be more considered reliable in helping to protect a regime from internal uprisings because their loyalty is to the government that pays them. The panelist then explained that the GCC militaries took a huge risk by intervening in Bahrain without knowing how the Iranians would respond. The intervention can be seen as evidence of a new level of assertiveness and confidence. Their attitude was, "If this starts a war, then so be it."



## Conclusion and Closing Remarks

---

One of the conference co-organizers began by thanking the panelists for their presentations. He noted that the level of sophistication in both the presentations and questions reflected the complexity of Gulf dynamics. He stated that the conference demonstrated the importance of avoiding quick judgments and facile generalizations about this rapidly changing region. Specifically, the notion that there is in fact an Arab Spring at all in the Middle East may be misplaced—much of the initial optimism about liberalization and lasting political change may be premature.

The belief that a new era in GCC unity is emerging also needs to be carefully scrutinized. On the surface, there is newfound coherence and assertiveness. But, as the speakers during the second panel noted, there are underlying structural impediments to the GCC achieving real, workable unity. The smaller Gulf states have a long history of thwarting GCC unity schemes as a way to irritate Saudi Arabia. The Gulf as a whole still has a long way to go in the area of military coordination. That said, as one of the attendees noted, the injection of Jordanian military expertise into the Gulf and the recent experience of the GCC militaries in Libya and Bahrain could herald a new chapter in Gulf military cooperation.

The belief that Iran's power has been enabled or amplified by the ongoing tumult in the Arab world is misplaced. Certainly, the Iranians desire to exploit the turmoil among the United States' Arab allies. But, as several panelists argued, Iran has encountered numerous obstacles and limitations in attempting to project its influence, many of which stem from Iran's ongoing domestic crisis and Ahmadinejad's declining stature among the Iranian elite. The Bahrain crisis also demonstrated the limits of Iran's influence and showed that, even when Iran's coreligionists are endangered, the Islamic Republic is guided by pragmatic calculations. The Syrian regime's crackdown is degrading Iran's standing on the Arab street as protestors are increasingly associating Iran and Hizballah with the despised Assad regime. Many of the GCC's fears about Iran's power are real and well founded, but others reflect a sort of popular hysteria and anxiety about change in the region. Such fears are being used cynically to deflect attention from domestic problems.

A key theme of the conference was the Gulf's widespread disenchantment with and anxiety about the reliability of the United States as a security partner—feelings exacerbated by the United States' seeming abandonment of its longstanding ally, Mubarak. As a result, there may be an increased preference in the Gulf for "security diversification" designed to supplement, but not supplant, U.S. assistance. The speaker noted particular turbulence in Saudi-U.S. relations and thanked the attendees and panelists for their debate about whether this friction represents a real, significant break in the partnership. He cited an observation made during the first panel that the United States has experienced similar friction with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states

before and that geopolitics always carries the day. Specifically, the threat of Iran is an enduring pillar of cooperation, and the United States will continue to be “the security patron of choice.”

That said, the speaker closed with a reference to the final panel’s discussion of the necessity of *not* continuing with the status quo on security cooperation in the Gulf. In particular, he urged the audience to think hard about recalibrating security sector and political reform in the Gulf to ensure that the Gulf does not remain a region in stasis and stagnation. Indeed, he noted, several panelists had convincingly argued that this status quo was ultimately unsustainable.