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

Mutual Equities and Enduring Relationships

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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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

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation
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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.