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The Gulf States and Syria

Summary

- The unrest in Syria offers the Gulf States an opportunity to weaken or even dislodge an Assad regime aligned with Iran, but their ability to project power or shape events in Syria is limited.
- Dislike of the Assad regime doesn't necessarily align Gulf interests and long-term vision for Syria. Moreover, cooperation on diplomacy and strategy is lacking.
- Sectarianism, most evidenced in media commentary and clerical statements, is already a major feature of Gulf discourse on Syria.
- Parts of the Syrian opposition have approached and have been courted by Gulf governments. Still, a degree of unease and mistrust continues to define their relations.

Introduction

The Gulf states were taken by surprise when the Syrian uprising started. Sensing opportunity yet wary of danger, they at first remained silent. And while they seemed headed toward a political and regional status quo, the stability of which looked increasingly uncertain, staying out of the fray seemed the best course of action.

They were unwilling and unable to assume the political and strategic costs of either investing in the overthrow of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or encouraging a negotiated settlement. Since then, however, unabated regime violence, enduring popular mobilization against it, prospects of a protracted sectarian war and Syrian accusations against several Gulf states have influenced the outlook and calculations of Gulf rulers.

There was already little love for the Assad regime in Gulf capitals prior to the uprising. The list of Gulf state grievances stems from a host of issues, from its Ba'athist, Alawite, pseudo-secular, pseudo-republican character and socialist economy, to a history of alignment with the Soviet Union, an alliance with Iran, support for terrorist groups and Palestinian factions, and meddling in Lebanon. Still, the longevity of the regime, its canny ability to play a regional role despite weak attributes of power and its surprising resilience to outside pressure mollified Gulf attitudes toward Damascus.

In addition, as with most regional challenges there exists no uniformity of views and few shared interests regarding Syria among the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As a result, and especially in recent years, the Gulf states stood divided. Concerned by Syria's perceived enabling of Iranian penetration into the Arab world and suspected responsibility in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a Saudi citizen and protégé, Saudi Arabia

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and, to a lesser extent the United Arab Emirates, adopted a tough approach. However, this gave way to acquiescence and even cooperation since 2009.

To their thinly-disguised anger, and as part of its bid for regional leadership, Qatar cultivated good relations with Damascus. It extended political, economic and media support to the Assad regime, and served as a facilitator of Syria's regional reintegration after years of isolation.

But the uprising in Syria has brought a measure of unity to the main Gulf states. It led them to adopt increasingly tough and coordinated political and rhetorical positions. And, it reportedly led them to provide funding to Sunni insurgents fighting against the regime. However, it hasn't yet compelled them to define, separately or together, a clear goal and then back it with a coherent and effective strategy.

The Interests of the Gulf States in Syria: Diverse and Rarely in Sync

No Gulf state is adjacent to Syria, and, save for significant tribal links with Saudi Arabia, societal interaction between Gulf and Syrian societies pales in comparison with other Levantine ones. Syria's cultural decline, the scarcity of exportable Syrian professional talent, and the Gulf states' own visa policies have limited dealings with Syria to elite circles.

- **Regional balance.** From the perspective of the Gulf states, the regional balance of power has been fundamentally upset by the political transformation of Iraq, the subsequent rise of Iran in the Persian Gulf and its growing influence in the Levant via Syria and Hezbollah. How to roll back Iranian power while maintaining and even relying on the decaying Arab order places Syria at the heart of Gulf strategic preoccupations. In recent years, these options ranged from isolating and combating Syria to engaging and attempting to lure it away from Iran. The notion that the loss of Iraq can be compensated by a power shift in Syria is now gaining traction in the Gulf.
- **Religious solidarity and sectarianism.** Save for Oman, the Gulf states are Sunni conservative monarchies whose religious character and legitimacy are at odds with Syria. The willingness and ability of the Gulf states to leverage and manipulate sectarian passions in Syria is widely assumed but not yet proven. In particular, Saudi Arabia has at times styled itself as the protector and reference of the Sunni majority but has achieved limited success because of the strong—albeit eroding—allegiance of senior Sunni clerics to the Syrian regime and Saudi Arabia's own distrust of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.
- **Business interests.** Syria's economic opening and desire for foreign investment have created opportunities for Gulf businesses, both state-owned and private. Politics and access to Syrian elites have determined winners and losers. Qatari firms have handsomely benefited from the emirate's once-close relations with the Assad regime. Likewise, while Abu Dhabi took a hardline regarding Syria since 2005 and refrained from investing there, Dubai companies became major players in Syrian real estate and infrastructure projects. Saudi businesses aligned with the faction pressing for a détente with Syria since 2009 have also been rewarded with contracts. Syrian and Gulf firms have formed a number of joint ventures in real estate, retail, and industry.
- **Tribal connections.** The area extending from northeast Syria to eastern Iraq to eastern Jordan to northern Saudi Arabia is populated by Sunni tribal confederations (though some include Shia members as well) linked by kinship and trade. Among them is the powerful Shammar tribe from which hails the mother of the Saudi monarch. Whether and how Saudi Arabia can use the tribal instrument remains in question. Many tribal leaders hold dual Syrian

and Saudi citizenship and have privileged access in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia however has a limited understanding of the nature and diversity of the Syrian opposition, and risks espousing too closely the perspective of its tribal and Wahhabi interlocutors.

- **No Gulf friends for the Assad regime.** Compared to Hosni Mubarak, who built strong friendships with Gulf rulers, Bashar al-Assad counts no friend among Gulf leaders. The rapprochement with Saudi Arabia in 2009-2010 was driven by Prince Abdelaziz bin Abdullah, the King's son, but was met with skepticism and opposition from powerful branches of the royal family.
- **The fate of Lebanon.** For Gulf elites, Lebanon is a battlefield where Iranian influence is contested, but it is also the place where many were educated, own property, have friendships, and spend holidays. The Gulf states accepted and even endorsed Syrian domination of Lebanon in the 1990s as a necessary ill to stabilize it. However, growing Lebanese Sunni resentment against the Assad regime since 1998 has influenced Gulf elites' thinking about Assad. The assassination of Hariri in 2005 radically shifted their views against Syria.

The Gulf States' Policy Since the Beginning of the Syrian Revolution

The beginnings of the Syrian uprising coincided with the GCC-backed crackdown against the opposition in Bahrain. In contrast with Iran, Syria voiced no criticism in public or at the Arab League about the intervention of GCC forces on the small island state. This won Damascus some goodwill in Gulf capitals and led to muted early media coverage of the Syrian revolution. Even as violence mounted in Syria, the Bahraini and Emirati foreign ministers visited Damascus, delivering messages of thanks from their rulers. Saudi King Abdullah offered a mild message of support to Assad.

Notably, the Gulf states initially abstained from pushing the Syrian issue at the Arab League or in international fora. Early on, there was also discussion in the Gulf about whether the Syrian uprising could force Assad to drop his alliance with Iran and turn to the Gulf states for capital, religious legitimacy, and protection from international pressure. Reports have circulated that Damascus was approached but turned down such offers in March and April and that Syria requested, but was denied, Gulf financial assistance in the form of deposits into the Syrian Central Bank.

Rising violence, growing media attention, and the increasingly sectarian portrayal (whether accurate or not) of the uprising compelled the Gulf states to adopt a harder line. Semi-official Syrian accusations that Qatar and Saudi Arabia were behind an anti-Assad conspiracy implemented by Salafis and the Muslim Brothers, especially after a forceful denunciation of Assad on Al Jazeera TV by Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, an influential preacher affiliated with the Brotherhood, further aggravated relations. A first opportunity for Gulf retaliation arose when Syria sought to win a seat traditionally reserved for an Arab state at the UN Human Rights Council. The Gulf states successfully thwarted the Syrian bid by rallying Asian support for Kuwait's eleventh hour candidacy.

Acrimony between Syria and the Gulf states escalated thereafter. Syria felt particularly betrayed by Qatar. It accused the small emirate of manipulating coverage by Al Jazeera and offering Syrian opposition a platform to attack the regime (Doha indeed hosted one of the first gatherings of the Syrian opposition). There were claims that Qatari investments in Syria (estimated to \$5-6 billion) could be seized by Syria. Some Qatari businesses decided to freeze projects or divest altogether from Syria. This culminated in a regime-engineered assault on the Qatari embassy in Damascus and the decision by Qatar to recall its ambassador and close its embassy.

The sense of betrayal went both ways as Qatar, which had been Syria's closest Arab ally, worked to form a consensus within the GCC and the Arab League against Syria. On a September visit to Tehran, the Qatari Emir reportedly even asked Iran to distance itself from Assad.

A key factor in the Gulf-Syria break was the escalation of violence during the Holy month of Ramadan, including a major military operation in the city of Hama, the place of a major massacre in 1982. Further inflaming the sense of religious outrage was footage broadcasted by Gulf media showing Syrian security forces beating dissidents into saying that their God was Bashar al-Assad. In an unprecedented move, Saudi authorities allowed a demonstration against the Assad regime outside the Syrian embassy in Riyadh. In Kuwait, Sunni parliamentarians demanded radical measures against Syria. In Bahrain, Sunni activists, some denouncing its Alawite character and its alliance with Shia Iran, demanded the same. The sectarian tone of this mobilization was unmistakable.

This led to increasingly stark Gulf statements starting in August. Kuwait and Qatar called for an immediate end to violence and for reforms and dialogue instead of pressing for regime change. The GCC issued a similar statement, which was rebuffed by Syria. In early August, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus. The same day, the Saudi monarch issued the harshest, most significant condemnation of events in Syria: “What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia . . . Syria should think wisely before it’s too late and issue and enact reforms that are not merely promises but actual reforms. Either it chooses wisdom on its own or it will be pulled down into the depths of turmoil and loss.”

The escalation by the Gulf states was also driven by geopolitical necessity. A weakened Syria invariably invites foreign interference. Iran’s efforts to shore up a precious ally were compounded by the decision by the Maliki government—much despised in the Gulf for his alleged Iranian connections and Shia supremacist views—to support the Assad regime for fear that a Sunni Islamist government would take over in Damascus. Another concern was that Turkey, Syria’s powerful northern neighbor, was emerging as pivotal in shepherding the transition in Damascus and shaping its future. Coordination with Turkey became essential to check Iran but also to prevent an outcome in which the Gulf states had little influence in Syria. Nevertheless, competition for influence over the new Syria between Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, though muted for the moment, stood as an obstacle to a common approach.

The Diplomatic Toolkit of the Gulf States

Gulf states find themselves in a conundrum: divided, unable to project power directly and less influential than other regional powers, Syria’s future still matters to them. They cannot, even if unified, broker a negotiated settlement or force the exit of Assad. However, they can inflame passions indirectly – through their tribal and Islamist connections, but also their media – and they can sweeten a deal aimed at obtaining Assad’s departure by offering safe haven, financial rewards, investments. Finding their place in the complex diplomatic game surrounding the Syrian crisis will be a challenge.

- **Support for Arab diplomacy.** To date, no Gulf state has publicly endorsed regime change in Syria, even though Gulf elites in private admit that the point of no-return for the Assad regime has been crossed. Still unsure about whether this outcome would serve their interests and concerned that a civil war could actually strengthen Iran’s hand, Gulf states have avoided bombastic statements. They prefer instead at present to rely on and hide behind Arab League diplomacy, however ineffective. In early September, the Qatari foreign minister Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani put Qatari and Gulf objectives this way: “The army must withdraw from inside the cities so that we can start talking about a dialogue between the people and the government . There are those who cast doubt on some of the intentions [of the Arab League] . . . but everyone supports Syria and its stability.” It is also notable that the UAE and Oman still maintain diplomatic relations with Damascus.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and the Middle East to identify the influence Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict, to forecast how the situation there will affect the regional balance of power, and to examine how the opposition and the Syrian regime are responding to these regional dynamics. Through its work, the Institute aims to provide analysis and tools for on-the-ground conflict management in support of political transitions across the Arab world. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, senior adviser for Middle East Initiatives, and Scott Lasensky, a former senior program officer. Emile Hokayem is the Senior Fellow for Regional Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies-Middle East based out of Mamana, Bahrain. He specializes in the security and the politics of the Gulf and the Levant.



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- **Containment of Syria in multilateral forums.** At an April vote at the UN Human Rights Council on Syria that adopted a mildly tough resolution on Syria, Saudi Arabia abstained while Qatar and Bahrain chose not to show up. Tellingly, in late August, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia approved a tougher resolution by the same UN body. No Gulf state sits on the UN Security Council at present, but they have lobbied in favor of a harsh presidential declaration in early August.
- **Outreach to the Syrian opposition.** The diversity of interests and relationships among Gulf states mean that each of them have multiple entry points into the Syrian opposition. Yet, even if they were successful into cultivating allies and proxies, they would still be unable to impose their agenda. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE deeply distrust the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's most powerful Islamist force. Saudi Arabia prefers to use its tribal and Salafi connections as well as relations with disgruntled regime figures. For its part, Qatar has heavily invested in the Muslim Brotherhood (along with Turkey) and hosts small meetings of the Syrian opposition. At the same time, the Gulf states have offered no unconditional safe haven and cover for the Syrian opposition to operate freely. Indeed, besides one larger meeting in Doha, and a number of smaller dialogue meetings, Syrian opposition leaders have preferred to hold their regional meetings in Turkey, a more hospitable country.
- **Media war.** The Gulf states control the main Arab satellite news channels and newspapers. They have allowed a non-stop, uncensored coverage of Syria, hosting opposition members of all persuasions and featuring defectors. On August 21, Al-Arabiya TV broadcasted an interview with Bashar al-Assad on Syrian state TV, juxtaposing it with footage of shabbiha (regime-backed Alawite thugs) in action. The most rabid sectarian language is the product of Wesal TV, a Saudi-funded Wahhabi channel, which hosts radical Sunni clerics that attack the Assad regime purely on religious grounds.

In return, Syrian media have accused Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya of fabricating news and footage of violence, and have even circulated rumors about coups against the Emir of Qatar. Pro-Hezbollah Al-Jazeera journalists have resigned in protest against the television's editorial line.

Similarly, opinion pages in Gulf media are littered with pieces extremely critical of the Assad regime. Ideas have been floated about freezing Syria's membership in the Arab League, and debates have raged over the wisdom and form of international action.

Importantly, religious figures have also penned harsh, sectarian denunciations of the Assad regime. Writing in *Asharaq al-Awsat*, Aaidh al-Qarni, a Saudi cleric, wrote: "I call upon the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars, the World Association of Muslim Scholars, the Al-Azhar University, the Muslim World League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, and other prominent Islamic organizations, as well as prominent Muslim figures and scholars, and indeed anyone who possess faith, a conscience, fear of God, and concern for Islam, to rise up and confront this [Syrian] regime which is an enemy of Islam and Arabism."