

The United States and the Arabian Peninsula

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This chapter examines whether and how policymakers in the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) perceive the US “pivot” away from the Middle East, and also explores the degree to which there is regional consensus as to the nature and depth of any such disengagement. Beginning in the Obama administration and continuing through both the Trump presidency and the Biden White House, aspects of US-Gulf relations have come under strain at different times over a range of issues. These have included, at various points, US responses to the Arab Spring uprisings, nuclear negotiations with Iran, the 2017–2021 blockade of Qatar, and attacks on maritime and energy targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. While concerns have varied in intensity and played out in sometimes contradictory ways, their cumulative effect was to inject some uncertainty into regional calculations regarding the United States as a reliable, or even a long-term partner.

There are three sections in this chapter, beginning with an overview of how the perception of US disengagement from the Middle East, and from the Gulf in particular, took root. This leads into a second section that

examines the varying reactions across the six GCC capitals and explores the specific issues that animate the concerns raised by Gulf officials at US policy shifts, whether real or perceived. Section three delves into the rise of other extra-regional partners and assesses whether any of them could ever realistically replace the role the United States has played in the Gulf since the 1980s.

Perceptions of Disengagement

No single incident triggered the perception that the United States was losing interest in the Middle East; rather, an accumulation of factors across a yearslong period contributed to the view expressed by some in the Gulf that US engagement was becoming more uncertain and less reliable. Some of these factors were fair reactions to policy decisions in Washington that caused concern in some GCC capitals, while others were indicative of the power that perceptions hold to take root and reinforce patterns of analysis. An additional factor is a broader contextual one, namely that the US military presence in the Gulf and the broader Middle East had increased enormously during America's "war on terror" and its invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, before subsequently declining. Combat operations in both countries meant that US troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq rose from 5,200 in fiscal year 2002 to a peak of 187,900 in fiscal year 2008.¹ Most US forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011 and their numbers declined in Afghanistan to 13,000 in 2019, before the Doha Agreement signed by US and Taliban representatives in February 2020 set a timeline for a full withdrawal.²

An elevated US military presence in the Arabian Peninsula, with basing arrangements and access to facilities that provided administrative and logistical support to the "forever wars" that followed the September 11 attacks, may have come to resemble a "new normal" in the eyes of ruling circles in GCC states. Moreover, the passage of time and the ascendance of a younger generation of leaders in the Gulf may have occluded the fact that the emergence of the United States as an extra-regional power was

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- 1 Amy Belasco, "Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues," Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009: 8–9, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>.
 - 2 Michael E. O'Hanlon, "5,000 Troops for 5 Years: A No Drama Approach to Afghanistan For the Next US President," Brookings Institution, December 5, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/5000-troops-for-5-years-a-no-drama-approach-to-afghanistan-for-the-next-us-president/>.

not a foregone conclusion but rather the outcome of a series of largely reactive decisions over a period of more than a decade in the 1980s and 1990s.³ The United States did not automatically or immediately fill the void left by the British after their withdrawal from longstanding security and defense arrangements with the smaller Gulf States in 1971. It took the internationalization of the Iran-Iraq War (through the “Tanker War” phase in 1984–88) and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 to establish the United States as a significant military presence in the Gulf. Even then, most US forces left the Arabian Peninsula after the conclusion of the Gulf War in 1991 and only returned on a permanent basis in 1994 after then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein again moved Iraqi troops toward Kuwait.⁴

A return to the long-term “mean” of the US presence in the region was therefore to be expected. However, a perception of relative US “disinterest” gradually took root over the 2010s, beginning with the Obama administration after it took office in 2009. Leaders in the Gulf appeared to interpret the phrase “pivot to Asia” (which began to more frequently pop up in American discourse around this time) to mean a rebalancing away from the Middle East, when it actually signaled a US desire to shift from a Cold War-era focus on Europe to concentrate on the Pacific as a fulcrum of twenty-first century geopolitics.⁵ A series of policy responses by consecutive US administrations to developments in the Middle East and North Africa also fed into a narrative of uncertainty about the United States’ posture. The perceived “abandonment” (as it was seen in the Gulf) of then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 left some wondering which US partner might be the next to suffer the same fate. And the United States’ acceptance of Egypt’s post-revolution electoral outcomes and its willingness to work with the Muslim Brotherhood presidency of Mohamed Morsi caused dismay in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.⁶

3 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Rebalancing Regional Security in the Persian Gulf,” Baker Institute for Public Policy, February 2020, p. 4, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/rebalancing-regional-security-persian-gulf>.

4 Anthony Cordesman, *Kuwait: Recovery and Security After the Gulf War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 127.

5 Kenneth G. Lieberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” Brookings Institution, December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

6 Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia Blames America for the Turmoil in Egypt,” Brookings Institution, August 19, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/saudi-arabia-blames-america-for-the-turmoil-in-egypt/>.

Between 2013 and 2015, the fact that US officials negotiated with Iranian counterparts, initially directly and in secret, and subsequently as part of the P5+1 (the United Nations Security Council members and Germany), unnerved GCC (and Israeli) officials, not least because of their exclusion from the process. Shortly after the November 2013 breakthrough that produced an interim agreement on Iran's nuclear program, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States, declared, "How we feel is that we weren't part of the discussions at all, in some cases we were—I would go so far as to say we were lied to, things were hidden from us."⁷ During the run-up to the agreement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015, an alignment of skepticism toward the Iran deal drew some of the Gulf States, notably the UAE and Saudi Arabia, closer to Israel, with tacit coordination of talking points and meetings of intelligence officials.⁸ By the end of Obama's time in office, relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had cooled to the extent that officials in both capitals reacted with fury to a "free riders" comment Obama made in a lengthy interview with *The Atlantic*, as they felt (erroneously) that it was directed at them.⁹

Reactions and Responses

There was no single or consensual response across the six GCC states to US policy moves or presumed shifts in approach. Leaders in three of the Gulf States—Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar—did not react especially strongly to the vicissitudes of the Obama administration, with Oman in particular engaging closely with Obama's secretary of state, John Kerry, during the Iran nuclear negotiations.¹⁰ Kuwait and Qatar also sent their respective

7 "Iran and P5+1 Sign Breakthrough Nuclear Deal," *Gulf States Newsletter* 37, no. 959 (November 28, 2013): 3, <https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/iran-and-p5-plus-1-sign-breakthrough-nuclear-deal>.

8 Hagar Shezaf and Rori Donaghy, "Israel Eyes Improved Ties with Gulf States after 'Foothold' Gained in UAE," *Middle East Eye*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-eyes-improved-ties-gulf-states-after-foothold-gained-uae>.

9 Turki al-Faisal Al Saud, "Mr. Obama, We Are Not 'Free Riders,'" *Arab News*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/894826>. A careful reading of Obama's interview with Jeffrey Goldberg suggests that he made the comment "free riders aggravate me" about the United Kingdom. See: Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

10 William Burns, *The Back Channel: American Diplomacy in a Disordered World* (London: Hurst & Co., 2019), 357–59.

heads of state, Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah and Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to the US-GCC summit at Camp David in May 2015 amid rumors that Saudi and Bahraini leaders had stayed away as displays of frustration at the Obama administration's regional policy approach.¹¹ Saudi Arabia and the UAE separately intervened militarily in Yemen in March 2015, in a move that suggested that, for them, pushing back assertively against (perceived) Iranian-backed regionally-destabilizing groups such as the Houthis movement took priority over the limited negotiations in Vienna on Iran's nuclear program.¹²

By the time of the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump presidency in 2016–17, the Saudis and the Emiratis were seen by some in the outgoing White House as having taken sides in domestic US politics. Speaking after Obama left office, Ben Rhodes, the former president's deputy national security advisor, suggested that Saudi and Emirati lobbying was “more responsible for the image of Obama being soft in the Middle East than anyone else. They trashed us all around town.”¹³ During the transition period, a visit by Abu Dhabi's then crown prince (but de facto leader), Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), to Trump Tower in New York caused controversy among US officials who had not been notified of his arrival in the US, in apparent contravention of diplomatic protocol.¹⁴ Both MBZ and Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) grew close to the Trump administration in early 2017 and Trump himself made his first overseas visit as president to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, where he was lavishly hosted by King Salman bin Abdulaziz.¹⁵

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- 11 Nahal Toosi and Michael Crowley, “A Saudi Snub?,” *Politico*, May 10, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/saudi-king-salman-to-skip-obamas-camp-david-summit-117801>.
 - 12 Peter Salisbury, “Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy,” Chatham House, July 2020, pp.32–33, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-07-01-risk-in-uae-salisbury.pdf>.
 - 13 Dexter Filkins, “A Saudi Prince's Quest to Remake the Middle East,” *The New Yorker*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>.
 - 14 Manu Raju, “Exclusive: Rice Told House Investigators Why She Unmasked Senior Trump Officials,” *CNN*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/13/politics/susan-rice-house-investigators-unmasked-trump-officials/index.html>.
 - 15 David D. Kirkpatrick and Mark Mazzetti, “How 2 Gulf Monarchies Sought to Influence the White House,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/us/politics/george-nader-elliott-broidy-uae-saudi-arabia-white-house-influence.html>.

This visit to Riyadh for the Arab Islamic American Summit was a break with the precedent of US presidents traditionally choosing to first visit Canada or Mexico, and Trump's time in Riyadh became controversial as it was followed two weeks later by the blockade of Qatar. In a series of three explosive tweets in June 2017, Trump referred back to his time in Riyadh and indicated that his support for the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini-Egyptian move against Qatar had roots in meetings he had held in Saudi Arabia, as he asserted, "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King [sic] and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism and all reference was pointing to Qatar."¹⁶ Trump's comments caused shockwaves, not only in Doha, where Qatari officials wondered if Trump was greenlighting possible military action against their country, but also within his administration, as the secretaries of state and defense, Rex Tillerson and James Mattis, respectively, hurriedly sought to repair the damage caused by his remarks.¹⁷

Any potential Saudi or Emirati escalation against Qatar, which was deemed by many observers as a realistic possibility in June 2017, was forestalled not by Trump but by the actions of the Turkish government, which pledged military support to Qatar and indicated that Doha would neither be alone nor isolated.¹⁸ This was significant given that in the post-1990 context of regional security it had been supposed that it would be the United States that would come to the assistance of Gulf partners should such intervention ever be necessary. Instead, it was Turkey that did so, amid unprecedented uncertainty in other Gulf capitals, such as Muscat and Kuwait City, as well as Doha, as to whether US security partnerships still held meaning in the Trump era. Thus, just as Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini officials had expressed their concerns about aspects of Obama's

16 Patrick Wintour, "Donald Trump Tweets Support for Blockade Imposed on Qatar," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/06/qatar-panic-buying-as-shoppers-stockpile-food-due-to-saudi-blockade>.

17 Mark Perry, "Tillerson and Mattis Cleaning Up Kushner's Middle East Mess," *The American Conservative*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/tillerson-and-mattis-cleaning-up-kushners-middle-east-mess/>.

18 "How Turkey Stood by Qatar Amid the Gulf Crisis," *Al Jazeera*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/14/how-turkey-stood-by-qatar-amid-the-gulf-crisis>.

approach to regional affairs, in the Trump administration it was the turn of the Qataris, the Kuwaitis, and the Omanis to do so.¹⁹

Ironically, in light of their proximity to the Trump White House and to officials such as Jared Kushner, in 2019 it was the Saudis and the Emiratis' turn to feel the shock of US (in)action in time of crisis. This came as the US withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018 and adopted a policy of "maximum pressure," which included new punitive economic sanctions on Iran and terror designations for Iranian entities.²⁰ One response to the US pressure was a series of acts of "maximum resistance," which revolved around attacks against maritime and energy targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE between May and September 2019. The incidents, never formally attributed to Iran, included hits on shipping and pipeline infrastructure, and culminated in missile and drone strikes on Saudi oil infrastructure that temporarily knocked out half the kingdom's oil production.²¹ A declaration by Trump two days after the Abqaiq attack, which drew a distinction between US and Saudi interests and emphasized that the US had not been a target, caused shockwaves in Riyadh, and in Abu Dhabi.²² Beginning in 2019, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE began to separately engage with Iran in attempts to de-escalate regional tensions, as leaders in each capital felt they could no longer be assured of US backing.

19 Speaking alongside former President Trump at the White House in September 2017, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad of Kuwait referred to the prospect of military escalation against Qatar, though without going into detail, saying, "What is important is that we have stopped any military action." See: "Remarks by President Trump and Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah of Kuwait in Joint Press Conference," The White House, September 7, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-emir-sabah-al-ahmed-al-jaber-al-sabah-kuwait-joint-press-conference/>.

20 Colum Lynch, "Iran: Maximum Pressure, Minimum Gain," *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/23/iran-maximum-pressure-trump-policy/>.

21 Natasha Turak, "How Saudi Arabia Failed to Protect Itself from Drone and Missile Attacks Despite Billions Spent on Defense Systems," *CNBC*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/19/how-saudi-arabia-failed-to-protect-itself-from-drones-missile-attacks.html>.

22 Steve Holland and Rania El Gamal, "Trump Says He Does Not Want War After Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities," *Reuters*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco/trump-says-he-does-not-want-war-after-attack-on-saudi-oil-facilities-idUSKBN1W10X8>.

Internationalizing the Gulf

In August 2021, the chaotic nature of the final American withdrawal from Afghanistan offered an additional signal for those doubting the United States' commitment to its partners and allies around the world, indicating that this uncertainty would continue into a third consecutive presidency, that of Joe Biden. Barely six months later, the sight of the Biden administration engaging intensively with international partners over Russia's military buildup and its subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine ought to have countered any such perceptions of US disengagement; but instead, the course of the war underscored how the Gulf States, like many parts of the Global South, were loath to formally pick sides in a great power rivalry.²³ Both MBZ and MBS reportedly rebuffed US and other western entreaties to raise oil production to bring down prices, and the Saudi crown prince even replied, "Simply, I do not care," when he was asked what he thought of Biden's opinion of him.²⁴ For his part, Biden had, during a campaign debate of Democratic presidential candidates in 2019, claimed that if elected he would make Saudi Arabia "the pariah that they are" and force them to "pay the price" for the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.²⁵

Relations between the Biden administration and the Gulf States have been colored by the fact that the Russia-Ukraine war has caused the White House to be focused elsewhere, and the administration has struggled to articulate a clear approach to the Middle East. In 2022, Qatar joined Kuwait and Bahrain as the third GCC state to be named a Major Non-NATO Ally of the United States, in recognition of the wide-ranging assistance Doha provided during the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its aftermath.²⁶ Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain outside the major non-NATO ally process and have instead deepened ties with Russia and

23 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Russia-Ukraine War and the Impact on the Persian Gulf States," *Asia Policy* 18, no. 2 (April 2023): 43–44, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/893919>.

24 Emile Hokayem, "Fraught Relations: Saudi Ambitions and American Anger," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 64, no. 6 (December 5, 2022): 9, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2022.2150422>.

25 Alex Emmons et al., "Joe Biden, In Departure from Obama Policy, Says He Would Make Saudi Arabia a 'Pariah,'" *The Intercept*, November 21, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/21/democratic-debate-joe-biden-saudi-arabia/>.

26 R. Clarke Cooper, "As Qatar Becomes a Non-NATO Ally, Greater Responsibility Comes with the Status," Atlantic Council, March 3, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/as-qatar-becomes-a-non-nato-ally-greater-responsibility-comes-with-the-status/>. Bahrain and Kuwait were accorded major non-NATO ally status by the George W. Bush administration, in 2002 and 2004, respectively.

China, primarily in economic and energy issues, but also with some security cooperation. Such moves may be understood as exercises in hedging, as policymakers in GCC states engage pragmatically in a changing global order with a multipolarity of centers of power and influence, including in the Gulf itself.

A complete US disengagement, and still less a withdrawal, from the Gulf remains a highly unlikely prospect, but GCC states are participating proactively in shaping a new regional landscape, one in which China looms large as a long-term partner in economic, energy, and, increasingly, political affairs. The trilateral Iran-Saudi-China statement that was issued in Beijing on March 10, 2023, and that set a roadmap for the restoration of diplomatic ties between Tehran and Riyadh, may be a harbinger of a more polycentric approach to regional affairs, one in which the United States remains an important security and defense partner for GCC states, but not the only one, and where the Gulf States increasingly function in a non-aligned manner that projects their own interests in picking a path between the strategic rivalries and great power competition around them.²⁷

27 Natasha Turak, "The China-Brokered Saudi-Iran Deal Has Big Repercussions for the Middle East—And the U.S.," *CNBC*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/15/does-chinas-role-in-saudi-iran-rapprochement-represent-a-new-order.html>.