American Strategic Interests in the Gulf States: Looking Beyond the 48-Hour Deadline

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The United States needs to be far more careful in dealing with the current crisis over the embargo and deadlines that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have imposed on Qatar. The current split within the Trump Administration—in which two critical cabinet members, Secretary Tillerson and Secretary Mattis, are calling for compromise and mediation, while the members of the President's staff have pushed him into siding with the Saudis and UAE—poses an unacceptable risk to U.S. strategic interests.

The President's erratic statements that have taken the side of Saudi Arabia and the UAE risk dividing the southern Arab Gulf states, pushing Qatar towards Iran and Turkey, and losing focus on deterring Iran and on dealing with the real-world threat of Islamic extremism. They also undermine U.S. influence and credibility in the region, and tie the United States to the long-standing rivalries and bickering between the southern Gulf states at a time when America has far higher strategic priorities to deal with.

Three common sets of strategic interests are involved. The first is the fight against violent extremism and terrorism—and many of the Saudi and UAE demands are little more than a strategic sideshow. Al Jazeera is largely an irritant—one that mixes reasonably competent reporting with some of the most biased commentary and panels imaginable, but still an irritant and not a threat.

On the other hand, some Saudi and UAE complaints are legitimate and do need to be pursued. Qatar has been far too tolerant in allowing the funding and operations of Islamist extremists that support violent movements. This Qatari support needs to be halted. But, quite frankly, such an effort should be part of a broader effort to halt private and official support and tolerance of such support by all the Gulf states. One key compromise might be to stop focusing on Qatar alone and to seek a GCC-wide agreement to establish limits to every form of support for extremism.

The United States, its European allies, every southern Arab Gulf state—and Iran, Iraq, and outside Arab states—need to recognize that a collective effort is needed to fight a long-term struggle against Islamic extremism, and that any current defeat of ISIS or Al Qaida can only be a limited and temporary victory. This does still mean enhancing cooperation in counterterrorism and supporting other states and common efforts to bolster moderate movements and forces that resist extremism.

It also, however, means addressing the ideological and religious threat, and developing a common focus on creating the political, social, and economic conditions that win public support—fighting corruption, providing adequate services, medical aid and education, creating jobs, and reducing the gaps between states and different sectarian and ethnic groups. The United States and every state in the region needs to act on the understanding that the fight against extremism has to be a civil-military battle and one where winning the people is even more critical than defeating the terrorists. Any fight against extremism that relies largely on counterterrorism and military force will either extend the fight by decades or be lost.
The second key strategic interest is the common need for Arab Gulf, U.S., and European security policies that create an effective deterrent to Iran. There is a clear need for better integrated air-sea-missile forces to counter Iran's asymmetric build-up of forces that can threaten shipping and the flow of petroleum through the Gulf. There is a need for conventional air, land, and naval forces to ensure the security of all the southern Arab Gulf states and which could offer Iraq reinforcements if it was threatened by Iran.

There is a need for integrated theater missile and air defenses to deal with Iran's build-up of ballistic and cruise missiles and efforts to acquire precision strike, conventionally armed missiles. There is a need to find integrated approaches to checking Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Al Quds Force in expanding its influence in nations like Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and threats to nations like Kuwait and Bahrain. There is a need to reinforce the limits imposed by the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) with a collective level of deterrence that shows Iran that any return to a nuclear weapons program would be met with extended deterrence by the United States and the potential threat of an Arab effort to create a matching nuclear capability.

At the same time, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE need to recognize that Qatar and Oman are correct in continuing to reach out to the more "moderate" elements in the Iranian government, and that deterring the Supreme Leader, hardline clerics and politicians, and the Revolutionary Guards should not mean demonizing Iran or alienating the Iranian people.

There is a need for constant dialogue, for showing Iranians that they can choose far more positive paths for the future, and that Arab-Iranian tensions do not mean encouraging sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite. Like "Islamophobia," "Iranophobia" can only be a self-inflicted wound to U.S. strategic interests. There is no credible way to force regime change on Iran, but there are many ways to encourage regime moderation and internal regime change over time. Like the fight against extremism, this is a civil-military struggle and the civil dimension is critical.

The third critical strategic need for cooperation between the southern Arab Gulf states—and between the United States, its European allies, and other Arab states—is to find ways to shape the future of Iraq and Syria, and eventually of Yemen and Libya. These are four very different states, but they all need to find some path towards conflict resolution that will bring lasting internal stability, recovery, and movement towards development—and to do so in ways that address the different interests of their fighting factions.

Iraq offers the most immediate opportunities, and has the most immediate needs. It is also a state where a strong and independent Iraq will clearly meet a common strategic interest. A strong Iraq can be a buffer between Iran and its Arab neighbors without threatening either side. It can meet the strategic needs of the United States and its allies without threatening other outside states, and it can show that today's most important sectarian and ethnic differences can be overcome. Taking advantage of such opportunities, however, requires a common understanding that Iraq will need significant aid, support for some new form of unity, and a serious focus on giving Iraq real independence as a strategic buffer that can shape its own destiny.

As for Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the key goal in each case must be to explore every possible path towards real stability and lasting conflict resolution. This will always mean giving governance, economics, and social needs the same or greater priority as security. It also will mean giving priority to creating a stronger and independent state, not some form of "victory" in terms of lasting outside influence and control. One key option might be to offer each state an international aid package that would be conditional on its factions reaching some form of serious agreement on how
to achieve stability, recovery, development, and actual performance—on offering an alternative to more fighting and competition for military support and assistance.

These are all areas where the United States has clear strategic interests in working with all of its allies in the Gulf—and the Arab world—as well as outside states. They are areas where Saudi Arabia and the UAE can play a critical security role, where Qatar can be a key source of aid, and where compromise—rather than dominance—can do the most to achieve the security interests of every state involved.

Such compromises are now extraordinarily difficult to make. Ultimatums rarely work out well as negotiating tools. The United States, however, can seek to find some face-saving way to help its allies begin such negotiations. It can show it is seeking to serve the interests of all its partners, it can offer aid where such aid is critical, and security guarantees where this will help.

This seems to be the Tillerson-Mattis approach and it is clearly the right one. A narrow focus on one aspect of U.S. strategic interest and one narrow element of the fight against Islamist extremism can only end in damaging U.S. interests and dividing the Arab Gulf states in ways that ultimately will serve the interest of movements like ISIS and Al Qaida. It will end up providing aid and comfort to the enemy.

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