

**"ALLIES OR PARTNERS:
DECIPHERING U.S.-GCC RELATIONS IN PEACE AND CRISES"
SUMMARY OF A WEBINAR HELD BY
GULF INTERNATIONAL FORUM
6 APRIL 2022**



OVERVIEW

Even prior to the start of the recent crisis with Russia, it had become evident that US-GCC relations had become more complicated as a result of U.S. signals of reduced interest in the Middle East. Recent increase in American oil and gas production to the highest record ever just as the Russian invasion of Ukraine exploded on the scene have now strained the relationship even more than ever before.

In actions unprecedented in the U.S.-GCC relationship, both Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and UAE Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) recently snubbed President Joe Biden's request for a telephone call. The response of both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Biden's request to increase oil production in order to dampen oil price rises and allow Europe to reduce its dependence on Russian energy seems to have also fallen on deaf ears. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi appear reluctant to end their commitment to the OPEC+ agreement with Russia to limit oil exports despite rapidly increasing oil prices worldwide, an increase with serious political and economic ramifications in the United States.

In such circumstances, suggesting that these developments have provoked great speculation about the future of U.S.-GCC relations would be an understatement especially as increase frictions in U.S.-GCC relations have already led to strained ties in the recent past.

America has expressed concerns for more than a decade about growing economic and, in some cases, security and geopolitical, ties between all the GCC states and China. The decision of the Biden Administration to find a way to restore the JCPOA, Obama's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran from which President Trump had withdrawn the U.S. in 2019, was not welcomed by most GCC states who had hoped for continued U.S. confrontation with Tehran. They saw the JCPOA as a signal that Washington sought to improve relations with Iran, reversing decades of unquestioned U.S. support for the Gulf Arab states and unbending hostility towards Tehran.

Thus, combined with Obama's announced "pivot to Asia" in 2009, U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, and American support for the "Arab Spring" anti-authoritarian uprising, the concerns of some Gulf monarchies that the U.S. no longer gave the priority they wanted to their security might be understandable. Also, long-term contradictions in GCC views of the U.S. have resurfaced. On one hand, Biden rewarded Qatar, naming it a Major Non-NATO Ally, for its long-time loyalty in supporting U.S. activities in the region -not least facilitating the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. On the other hand, the U.S. continues to publicly criticize the Saudi-led war in Yemen, although it continues to provide material support to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to defend against Yemen's Houthis attacks on both countries.

To examine these issues, a webinar moderated by Ambassador Patrick Theros of the GIF, examined the current complications in the relationship between the US and the GCC with a panel of experts, who also took into consideration additional factors such as the fallouts resulting from the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS MADE BY THE PANELLISTS

1. **Professor David Des Roches** (*Associate Professor, Near East South Asia Center for Security Studies; Non-resident Senior Fellow, Gulf International Forum*)
 - Long standing ties built over many years around security and oil have more recently become personalized between GCC leaders and the incumbent US president.
 - Relations between the US and KSA became seriously affected when Joe Biden in the course of the 2020 presidential election and in the wake of investigations regarding Jamal Khashoggi as well as the ongoing war in Yemen suggested that KSA should be seen as a "pariah state".
 - There are also a "parade of UAE grievances against the US going back to the Arab Spring, Obama's Syrian red line and US inaction over the recent drone attacks by the Houthis".
 - While the Carter Doctrine will not allow for outside forces to take control of events in the Persian Gulf, it offers no guarantees for defending any of its regimes.
 - While US forces in and around the region has been drawn down, the infra-structure for US forces to resume operations in that region is as robust as ever.
 - **Conclusion:** Matters now depend on the outcome of the JCPOA talks. In the event that there is no revival of the JCPOA, US-GCC ties are likely to improve

2. **Anna Jacobs** (*Senior Political Officer, The Shaikh Group*)

- The GCC still continues to look to the US as its main security partner.
- Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait are seen by the US along the lines of a non-NATO ally, while the UAE and KSA are looked upon as important partners.
- From the US perspective at this time, the GCC is seen at the forefront for reducing reliance on Russian energy.
- However, relations between the US and both KSA and UAE are seen to be under pressure, exacerbated as what the two Arab Gulf states see as a weak US response to Houthis attacks that have been carried out against them.
- Another pressure points in the US-KSA/UAE relationship has been the reluctance on the part of the 2 Arab states to place extra pressure on Russia (e.g., UAE abstention in the UN Security Council vote).
- Conflicted about US strategic objectives in the Middle East both for the short term and the long term, the GCC have looked to closer ties with Turkey and Israel for fending off their perceived threats from Iran (though these have problems of their own)
- There is also a feeling in the GCC that the US is forging its Middle East policy by viewing matters from the prism of the Iran nuclear deal, leaving the impression that if the deal is signed, then the US will continue with its policy of pivoting away from the region.
- **Conclusion:** A JCPOA agreement is looking less likely to happen at this time which will result in a better atmosphere for US-GCC ties.

3. **Dr. Kenneth Katzman** (*Senior Middle East Analyst, the U.S. Library of Congress*)

- There is a great of tension at this time between the US and the two Gulf state of KSA and UAE.
- KSA and UAE feel that at this time the US needs them more and as such they can exercise more leverage by getting closer to China and Russia.
- Qatar for its part feels that its supply of gas and its hosting of US troops makes it essential in all US calculations.
- Realistically however, none of the Gulf countries have the leverage they think they have, given that China's only interest in the region is economic (no wish on its part to participate in the defence of the region) without also wanting to antagonize Iran, especially at a time that they are buying more oil from it than any time since 2016.
- Furthermore, only 1% of KSA's arms purchases come from China. The same also applies to Russia's arms sales to the region.
- UAE refusal to condemn Russia at the Security Council was due to Russian promises to help out with the Houthis at a time when it was

pushed by the US to step back from certain agreements to build ports with China if it wanted to receive the US built F-35s.

- Also, both MBZ and Amir Tamim have recently visited Russia, aware that Russian interest in the Middle East is mainly limited to Syria. Thus, Gulf states will limit their cooperation with Russia to just energy issues.
- Given the performance of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, it has become clear that Russia cannot in any calculation be used as a counter-weight to the US. On the contrary, it has made the role of the US to be both more indispensable and irreplaceable.
- Qatar is now in a pivotal position because of pressures to divorce Russia from European gas, although the EU has in the past been reluctant to sign long term agreements with Qatar.
- **Conclusion:** Tensions are likely to remain mainly because the US is not seen to be doing more to roll back Iranian activities in the region. The GCC has gained more leverage in the Ukraine war because of oil - something that could lead to more contentious debates.

4. **Ambassador Robert Gallucci** (*Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy, Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service*)

- The Middle East, according to the latest fact sheet for US Defence Strategy does not figure prominently.
- There is no question that the US has pivoted towards China.
- The current war between Russia and Ukraine is but a distraction in that bigger picture, although Iran is seen as a potential nuclear threat in the same light that Israel is being looked upon as an important ally.
- At this time, the White House is looking for the "Democratic Party's version of America First", given its concern for the upcoming 2022 Congressional elections.
- The US is no longer interested in advancing democracy and wants to pursue a course that can display "to the middle class the benefits of US foreign policy".
- **Conclusion:** GCC attitudes towards the JCPOA is for US-Iran ties to remain contentious. But the US wants the agreement because it wants to go elsewhere!

