

# GULF ANALYSIS PAPER



## Gulf States' Policies on Syria

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### SUMMARY

The outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 provoked Gulf countries to adopt unprecedentedly assertive policies in the Middle East. The majority of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states enthusiastically called for the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, seeing an opportunity to roll back Iranian influence in the region. But as the conflict drew on, these countries' different priorities and calculations became apparent.

GCC countries' policies on Syria throughout the last five years of conflict have shifted and diverged. For some smaller GCC countries, concerns about increasing instability in the Middle East have outweighed their desire to see regime change in Syria. Others that have invested most in factions of the Syrian opposition believe that they can only achieve their interests by increasing their involvement in the conflict. ■

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Amidst the confusion, euphoria, fear, and uncertainty that surrounded the Syrian uprisings of 2011, one thing was clear: virtually all of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states supported the Syrian opposition.<sup>1</sup> Their decision was a calculated one, resting on the belief that Bashar al-Assad's fall would be a blow to Iranian influence in the Middle East.

In recent years, however, this unity has diminished and states' priorities have changed. Those countries that have invested the most in the Syrian conflict, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar, now increasingly agree on which Syrian opposition groups to support, and they have adopted progressively more assertive policies in Syria. Other countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have toned down their rhetoric and reduced their support for the Syrian opposition, focusing instead on playing a greater diplomatic and humanitarian role.

The current splits seem durable. Saudi Arabia and Qatar appear intent on using their Syria policy to spur the United States into playing a more active role in the conflict. The other GCC members are much more cautious about regime change, and they are especially wary of any steps that would allow salafi-jihadi groups to establish a permanent foothold in Syria. A new U.S. administration could change the calculus of the first group. More likely, though, the splits will endure until the balance of power changes on the ground in Syria.

### Turning against Assad

When the Arab Spring uprisings broke out in 2011, the conservative Gulf states felt threatened and adopted unprecedentedly assertive policies in the region in an attempt to preserve the status quo. In January 2011, the late Saudi king, Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud, blasted the protesters calling for the overthrow of Egyptian president Mubarak for their "destruction, intimidation, burning, looting, and malicious sedition."<sup>2</sup>

### GULF ANALYSIS PAPERS

In conjunction with its Gulf Roundtable series, the CSIS Middle East Program issues periodic policy papers addressing a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region. Launched in April 2007, the Gulf Roundtable regularly assembles a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a great understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the strategic importance of Gulf energy, changing Gulf relations with Asia, human capital development, media trends, trade liberalization, the conflict in Yemen, and prospects for greater regional integration. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

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But Saudi Arabia was unable to prevent its key ally from being toppled in February 2011. This setback prompted Riyadh to launch an unusually muscular intervention in regional affairs to ensure it would not lose another of its allies. Two months later, after a period of unrest in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia sent over 1,000 troops to Bahrain as part of a GCC force and successfully prevented the ruling Khalifa family from succumbing to Mubarak's fate.<sup>3</sup> The threat of internal unrest was a growing concern for GCC countries, which blamed foreign powers for the domestic disturbances. In April 2011, the six member states issued a joint statement accusing regional rival Iran of meddling in their internal affairs, fomenting criminal plots, and running spy rings in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Yet when the protests spread to Syria, a close ally of Iran, some Gulf countries started to weigh the potential benefits they could reap from regime change. Toppling President Bashar al-Assad would undermine Iran's ability to influence its Lebanese and Palestinian allies in the rival "resistance front," and would thus enhance Saudi Arabia's own influence in the region. But Gulf states were aware of the dangerous precedent that openly supporting regime change could set, and so initially held back. Indeed, as late as the end of July 2011, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait both indicated their continued support for the Assad regime by loaning the Syrian government 375 billion riyals (\$100 million) and 30 million dinars (\$109 million) respectively.<sup>5</sup>

As the Gulf states grew more confident that they themselves could weather the uprisings, most began to adopt overtly anti-Assad stances. Qatar precipitated an abrupt shift in July 2011: after its embassy was attacked by pro-regime militias protesting Al-Jazeera's coverage of the Syrian uprising, Qatar became the first Arab state to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus.<sup>6</sup>

Qatar's sudden move likely surprised Assad. The two countries had formerly enjoyed close ties, with the Assad family even vacationing in Qatar. Of any GCC state, Qatar had also had some of the closest relations with Iran, with the two countries even sharing management of a large gas

field.<sup>7</sup> But a number of factors in addition to the attack on its embassy led to Qatar's decision to sever relations with Syria.

First, buoyed by the apparent success of its active role in supporting regime change in Egypt and Libya, Qatar's regional interactions grew increasingly bold. Doha believed that installing an Islamist-leaning government in Damascus would further enhance its regional influence, and that those were benefits for which it was worth jeopardizing its relations with Iran. But in addition to enhancing its regional standing, Qatar saw that facilitating regime change in Syria would help it realize its energy ambitions. Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani had invested considerably in Qatar's gas sector, and there is speculation that he planned to export gas to Europe by constructing pipelines through Syria.<sup>8</sup> Finally, with national policymaking undertaken by a concentrated circle around the emir, it was easy for Qatar to perform dramatic foreign policy shifts.<sup>9</sup> In short, having calculated that the fall of Assad would bring both geopolitical and economic benefits, Qatar enthusiastically embraced the Syrian opposition.

GCC members' apparent unity on Syria policy was short-lived.

Qatar's policy shift coincided with increasing levels of violence in Syria, which the UN Security Council, Russia, and Turkey all condemned. In the first week of August 2011, Kuwait, the GCC, and then Saudi Arabia followed suit, seeing the change in international opinion as the opportune time to join those publicly denouncing the Syrian regime. Qatar seized advantage of the growing international consensus on Syria and its temporary leadership of the Arab League to lead diplomatic offensives against Assad. After hosting a meeting of Syrian opposition figures, Qatar formulated a plan for Assad to hand power to a deputy, and then pushed forward a proposal to send Arab League monitors into Syria.<sup>10</sup>

The stage was set for a more dramatic GCC policy shift seeking to upend the status quo. In the summer of 2011 all apart from Oman enthusiastically embraced factions of the Syrian opposition, wagering that Assad would be the next Middle East leader to fall. However, Assad did not fall quickly, and GCC members' apparent unity on Syria policy was short-lived.

## The Saudi-Qatari Divide

Initially, the greatest divide between the Gulf states emerged over the issue of which opposition groups to back. Different Gulf states' sponsorship of opposition groups reflected their varying motives for toppling Assad. From 2011 to 2014, the principal split was between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and this divide had a profound impact on the trajectory of the conflict. The Qatari-Turkish relationship, a relative constant throughout the conflict, solidified early when Qatar embraced the Syrian National Council (SNC) which was the first credible opposition umbrella group and one that Turkey helped create.<sup>11</sup> Qatar nurtured its networks in the Muslim Brotherhood and funneled financial support through middlemen to make the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood one of the most powerful actors in the SNC.<sup>12</sup> This policy troubled Qatar's Gulf neighbors, which feared the Brotherhood's rise in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE instead favored opposition groups considered to be more moderate, having fewer ties to salafi-jihadists. In doing so, they coordinated with Jordan and the United States more than with Turkey. One example of this coordination was the establishment of a joint military operations room in Jordan that hosted Jordanian, U.S., and Saudi officers.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of 2012, infighting among the Syrian rebels, largely fueled by competition for external funding, crippled the opposition's effectiveness.

By the end of 2012, infighting among the Syrian rebels, largely fueled by competition for external funding, crippled the opposition's effectiveness and prompted renewed international calls for unity.<sup>14</sup> In a sign that the balance of power had started to shift away from Qatar's Syrian allies, Brigadier General Salim Idriss emerged as chief of staff of the Free Syrian Army after days of debates in Istanbul. His promises to protect Syria's minorities won him Western backing, and with Saudi Arabia and the UAE also agreeing to channel funding through him, there were hopes that the opposition would unite.<sup>15</sup>

However, private individuals from the Gulf, including many Qataris, continued to sponsor individual brigades.

Although there is no evidence that the Qatari state ever intended to fund extremist groups in Syria such as Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State group (ISG), the gradual radicalization of opposition groups in 2013 meant that some of those that had formerly benefited from Qatari sponsorship joined extremist groups.<sup>16</sup> In December 2013, for example, Saddam al-Jamal, a top Free Syrian Army commander in eastern Syria who reported having received Qatari support, announced his defection to the ISG.<sup>17</sup>

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As the Syrian conflict grew more overtly sectarian, tensions between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors increased, with reports circulating that Qatar was funding Ahrar al-Sham and other salafi-jihadi groups in Syria.<sup>18</sup> Ahrar al-Sham is a militant salafi group that aims to replace Bashar al-Assad's rule with an Islamist government, and has mainly operated in northern Syria throughout the conflict. In response, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014.<sup>19</sup> This move was partly motivated by the stated concerns for internal security within the Gulf, but it was also an attempt to coerce Qatar to change its policy in Syria. Saudi Arabia was beginning to realize that unity in Gulf policy on Syria was crucial to achieving its interests, since it did not consider its other allies to be pulling their weight.

## The Isolation of the Gulf

Throughout the conflict, Gulf countries have expressed their increasing disappointment with the United States for not playing a more active role in Syria. When Obama failed to authorize military intervention after the chemical weapons attack in the eastern Ghouta in August 2013—the crossing of his famous “red line”—the dismay was acutely apparent. On October 18, 2013, Saudi Arabia became the first country in history to reject a Security Council seat, citing the ongoing crisis in Syria as “irrefutable evidence and proof of the inability of the Security Council to carry out its duties and responsibilities.”<sup>20</sup> The sudden move was a stark expression of the Gulf kingdom's dismay over the international community's approach to the Syrian conflict.

In a sign of growing anger, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, the former head of Saudi intelligence, went on record and openly described Obama’s conduct in Syria as “lamentable.”<sup>21</sup>

**Saudi Arabia also grew increasingly concerned about Obama’s blind eye to Iran’s expanding presence in Syria.**

Having invested considerable financial and diplomatic efforts in the campaign to oust Assad, Saudi Arabia also grew increasingly concerned about Obama’s blind eye to Iran’s expanding presence in Syria. Adel al-Jubeir, then Saudi ambassador to the United States, reportedly told Riyadh that “Iran is the new great power of the Middle East, and the [United States] is the old.”<sup>22</sup> By this stage, Iran was conducting an “extensive, expensive, and integrated” effort to protect the Syrian regime, which included granting Assad two credit facilities to the value of \$4.3 billion in 2013 and sending armed forces into the conflict.<sup>23</sup> In the fall of 2013, a Syrian rebel group captured a camera belonging to a videographer attached to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a branch of the Iranian armed forces; the footage provided the first hard evidence of the extent of Iran’s military involvement in the war.<sup>24</sup> Then, in November 2013, the interim P5+1 agreement with Iran on its nuclear program sent a clear signal to the Gulf countries that progress was being made in negotiations.<sup>25</sup> The combination of these developments was deeply troubling for Saudi Arabia, which had sought to roll back Iranian influence in the region by increasing their involvement in the Syrian conflict. The need for a new approach seemed evident.

## New Partnerships in the Gulf

In June 2013, Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani announced his abdication and handed power to his British-educated, 33-year-old son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Taking advantage of the change in leadership, and growing increasingly concerned about the U.S. stance in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar chose to put aside their differences and coordinate their efforts in Syria. They saw this approach as the most effective way to counter Iran’s

growing influence in the region. After mediation efforts led by the emir of Kuwait, the GCC countries reopened their embassies in Doha in November 2014. In exchange, Qatar expelled leading Muslim Brotherhood figures, while agreeing to pledge “full support” to Egypt’s new president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>26</sup>

Now convinced that the United States was not going to tip the balance to topple Assad, Saudi Arabia increased its coordination with Qatar and Turkey on Syria. The Saudis and Qataris formed a working group that—seemingly ignoring U.S. concerns—supported coalitions of opposition factions that contained hard-line salafi groups.<sup>27</sup> The Jaysh al-Fatah, a coalition of factions sponsored by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, included Jabhat al-Nusra, a group then officially aligned with al Qaeda.<sup>28</sup> As part of a new wave of offensives against Assad, Jaysh al-Fatah took the northern city of Idlib from regime forces in May 2015.

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This decision to support more radical salafi-jihadi groups was one of Saudi Arabia’s more assertive moves to counter Iranian influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia also pushed for the formation of GCC and Arab League joint commands, and put on a grandiose show of military strength in the form of a 12-day joint exercise (named Northern Thunder) with hundreds of thousands of troops from 20 countries.<sup>29</sup> When Russia and Iran increased their military interventions in support of Assad in the fall of 2015, once again turning the tide of the war back in Assad’s favor, the Saudis launched even more dramatic steps. Saudi Arabia responded to Lebanon’s failure to condemn an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran by cancelling \$4 billion in military aid.<sup>30</sup> The Saudis interpreted Beirut’s snub as evidence of Iran’s increasing influence in Lebanon, and hoped that such a drastic move would coerce Lebanese politicians back in line. Such moves have ensured that the intensifying Saudi-Iranian rivalry reverberates across the Middle East.

## Growing Concerns in the Smaller GCC Countries

As Saudi Arabia and Qatar have funded more radical jihadi groups in Syria and carried out more assertive policies in the region, other GCC countries have moved in the opposite direction. At first, the UAE's and Bahrain's policies in Syria were largely in line with Saudi policy, while Kuwait served as a central hub for private fundraising to the Syrian opposition due to its lax financial regulations. Largely through tribal, economic, or religious networks, private fundraisers utilized social media and traditional fundraising to solicit donations from both inside Kuwait and abroad.<sup>31</sup>

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But for these smaller GCC countries, the threat of internal strife was greater than the threat posed by Iran. Initially, it was tensions with Iran that made Kuwait shy away from tightening fundraising regulations; the concern was that certain members of Parliament would see such a move as acting on behalf of Iran.<sup>32</sup> However, as opposition groups increasingly took on their funders' ideologies, and as Kuwaitis continued to raise money for competing sides in the Syrian conflict, sectarian tensions escalated to an alarming extent. To cite one prominent example from 2013: a professor of shari'a law at Kuwait University, a state-run institution, delivered a speech outside the Lebanese embassy in Kuwait praising the massacre of 60 Shi'a villagers, including children, from Hatla in eastern Syria. He also called on Syrian rebels to hand over 10 captured Hezbollah fighters so he could personally execute them.<sup>33</sup> Incidents such as this contributed to mounting sectarian tensions, which motivated the Kuwaiti government to pass a law in 2013 that criminalized terrorist financing, froze terrorist assets, and established a Financial Intelligence Unit.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, the rise of the ISG in Syria and Iraq added to perceptions of instability and insecurity in the region. All the GCC countries except Oman joined the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, and all six committed forces to the U.S.-led anti-ISG coalition in 2015. The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, asserted

that the UAE was "keen to liaise and cooperate with different countries regionally and internationally to build counter-terrorism strategies."<sup>35</sup> This focus on the ISG and the conflict in Yemen seems to signal a shift in priorities on Syria.

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Indeed, smaller Gulf states are no longer as vocal in their calls to topple Assad; combating the ISG seems to be more pressing. In February 2016, after talks on Syria, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa presented Russian president Vladimir Putin with a sword "for imminent victory" made from Damascus steel.<sup>36</sup> The gesture seemed to imply his support for Russia's military intervention on behalf of Assad in Syria. Meanwhile, the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan are coordinating to a greater extent with Russia. Following a meeting with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in February 2016, the Emirati foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan asserted that the two countries should "work together and put our regional disagreements aside."<sup>37</sup> It is unclear what the result of these overtures to Russia will be, but they certainly indicate a desire to mitigate the impact of the conflict and the spread of instability in the region. These countries seem to have accepted that the conflict in Syria will not conclude with an outright victory for the opposition groups they previously favored, and they are no longer insisting on Assad's removal as a precondition for a political solution.

## Gulf Countries' Diplomatic and Humanitarian Roles

In addition to direct or indirect military support, the Gulf countries are also using diplomatic and humanitarian tools in their attempts to mitigate the negative regional impact of the Syrian conflict. Oman, the only GCC state to maintain diplomatic relations with Damascus throughout the conflict, is seeking to play a diplomatic role and to build on the success of its mediating role in the Iran nuclear talks. In August 2015, reports circulated that it was attempting to convene talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the Syrian

issue.<sup>38</sup> Although Kuwait has denied playing a mediation role in the Syrian conflict, saying it would not “step out of the GCC framework,” it did play an important role in mediating the reconciliation between Qatar and the other GCC states in 2014.<sup>39</sup> The ramifications of this agreement on the Syrian conflict were significant, as discussed above.

However, Kuwait’s most important official intervention in the Syria crisis was its hosting of the first major United Nations conference to raise humanitarian aid for Syrians. The January 2013 conference raised pledges of over \$1.5 billion from the international community,<sup>40</sup> with the two largest pledges, each of \$300 million, coming from Kuwait and the UAE.<sup>41</sup> Subsequent conferences hosted or cohosted by Kuwait in 2014, 2015, and 2016 raised successively greater amounts.<sup>42</sup> Much of the UAE’s support has gone to refugees in countries neighboring Syria; for example, the UAE funds the Mrajib al-Fhood camp in Jordan.<sup>43</sup> This focus on Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq appears to indicate the UAE’s desire to help maintain the stability of these countries.

For the smaller GCC countries, maintaining regional stability is a far greater priority than removing the Assad regime in Syria; their diplomatic and humanitarian efforts, and the focus of their military operations on combating the ISG rather than supporting opposition groups in Syria, indicate as much. Although they are careful not to announce a major shift in their Syria policies in public, their rhetoric now focuses much less on Bashar al-Assad and any call for regime change than in the past.

## Conclusion

The two GCC countries that invested most in toppling Assad—Saudi Arabia and Qatar—are now looking more isolated than ever within the international community. Their initial policies on Syria seemed irreconcilable, but by late 2014 the perception of being abandoned by the United States pushed them toward greater cooperation. Both countries had hoped that the United States would intervene decisively against Assad, but even after Assad crossed Obama’s red line, this did not occur. Saudi Arabia therefore began coordinating its support to opposition factions—including groups with salafi-jihadi ideologies—with both Qatar and Turkey. This support contributed to the gradual radicalization of the opposition, which in turn further increased the United States’ reticence to act against Assad. The United States and Russia agreed to the establishment of a “Joint Implementation Center” as part of their ceasefire deal in September 2016 which intended to coordinate the two countries’ intelligence and airstrikes

against agreed radical jihadi targets in Syria. As such, the ceasefire contributed to the trend of reducing the focus on Assad.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, some of Saudi Arabia’s and Qatar’s key regional allies have also increased coordination with Russia, adding to the Gulf countries’ sense of isolation. Saudi Arabia had long worked with Jordan to coordinate support to the Syrian opposition, but in early 2016, Jordan established an operations center in Amman with Russia to direct operations in Syria.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Qatar’s main ally in the Syrian conflict, Turkey, has also signaled a possible shift in its Syria policy. In June 2016, Turkey normalized relations with both Israel and Russia, and then released ambiguous statements about the desire to return ties with Syria “to normal.”<sup>46</sup> A sudden U-turn in Turkish policy is unlikely given the significant resources it has expended on supporting the Syrian opposition, but the current recalibration of Ankara’s foreign policy is likely to cause unease in Riyadh and Doha. Even fellow GCC countries such as Bahrain and the UAE have indicated that ensuring regional stability is a greater priority than regime change in Syria. Broadly, opposition to Assad’s regime among key regional players appears to be softening.

The prospect of a jihadi victory in Syria appears to have made Bashar al-Assad more secure. In part, turning the conflict into a battle between Assad and the jihadists seems to have been Assad’s strategy all along. But it also represents a setback for the strategy Saudi Arabia and Qatar embraced—that is, support for “effective” opposition fighters now and plans for sidelining the jihadists later. For the GCC as a whole, which was unified on the need to limit Iranian influence in the Levant, the current situation is far from favorable. Leaders certainly hope for a decisive change in U.S. policy with the coming of a new U.S. president in January 2017. Absent that, however, it seems unlikely that either Gulf approach will yield the desired results. ■

## Notes

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14. Dickinson, “Case against Qatar.”

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16. Dickinson, “Case against Qatar.”

17. Basma Atassi, “Syrian Fighter Defects to Qaeda-Linked Group,” *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/12/syrian-fighter-defects-qaeda-linked-group-201312158517493207.html>.

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31. This information is from a U.S. Treasury official quoted by Elizabeth Dickinson, “Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria’s Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home,” *Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper Number 16, December 2013.

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