



Assessing Buffers and Drivers of Conflict in the Arab Gulf

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What is NSI Reachback?

The Joint Staff, Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), jointly with other elements in the Joint Staff, Services, and United States Government (USG) Agencies, has established a Reachback capability based on the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) team’s global network of scholars and area experts. It provides Combatant Commands with population-based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations. The Reachback team combines written and interview elicitations with additional research and analyses to provide concise responses to time-sensitive questions.

This report responds to one of a series of questions posed by USCENTCOM about the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region.¹

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Question of Focus

[A9] What would cause the Qatar-Quartet rift to turn into a military conflict? How would the US and other great powers react?

Assessing Buffers and Drivers of Conflict in the Arab Gulf²

Bottom Line Up Front

Experts contend that the risk of militarization of the dispute between Qatar and the Quartet is low. However, prolonged tension between the two sides has failed attempts at mediation and the underlying issues persist. Until a diplomatic resolution is achieved, the dispute raises the risk of militarization, however unlikely such escalation may be. The rift may be resolved if Qatar ceases soft power projection that aggravates the governing legitimacy of the Quartet, or if the Quartet relents on its distrust of Qatar and elevates Doha to a more independent status. The most likely avenues of conflict appear to be unintentional confrontation, overt Qatari support for oppositionists that can credibly threaten the Quartet's domestic legitimacy, and proxy conflict (in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia). Restored diplomatic dialogue between Qatar and the Quartet could enable cooperation to overcome such scenarios. However, it is difficult to predict if such dialogue could be achieved in the present climate if one of the aforementioned avenues occurs. Moreover, precipitous escalation remains a possibility given Qatar's external supporters (Iran, Turkey, Russia). In the unlikely event of militarization, Russia would likely act opportunistically to increase its regional influence where possible, the US would likely work aggressively to preserve Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) unity while working to combat Iran, and China would likely lack significant mechanisms of influence but would nonetheless support immediate mediation to prevent any resulting economic instability.

Background

Following alleged remarks³ by Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim Al Thani, criticizing US foreign policy and praising Iran, the self-proclaimed anti-terror Quartet (ATQ), consisting of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain, severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and initiated a diplomatic blockade, citing claims of Doha's support for terrorism and support for Iran (Chughtai, 2018). Since the start of this dispute between Qatar and the Quartet, attempts to resolve the tension have consistently failed.⁴ The stalemate has rendered the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as ineffective,⁵ and has revealed both generational rifts among Arab Gulf leadership and that the Gulf's traditional, fraternal mechanisms of resolving disputes are beholden to the nationalized politics of member states

² The following subject matter experts kindly contributed to this analysis: **Behnam Ben Taleblu** (Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **Giorgio Cafiero** (Gulf Stream Analytics), **Dr. David Roberts** (King's College London), and **Kristian Coates Ulrichsen** (Rice University).

³ The Qatari government claims that these remarks are false and were posted by hackers; the quotes were widely publicized and were highly contentious (BBC 2017).

⁴ There have been three annual GCC summits since the crisis that have failed to ease tensions (Ulrichsen, 2019). According to Ulrichsen (2019), the most recent summit in December 2019 concluded with a "return to the situation of 2017/2018 where the blockade was stuck [and] neither side was willing to make the first move to a concession or a compromise."

⁵ While the dispute has left the GCC functioning "at the minimum level" (Toumi, 2019), Asisian (2018) argues that the current dispute has revealed that GCC states "contradict each other's national interests, and there exists no neutral body capable of solving their conflicting interstate interests."

(Kinninmont, 2019). At the heart of the dispute are several Quartet grievances toward Qatar, as detailed by a list of thirteen demands given to Qatar by the Quartet in June 2017 as the conditions for lifting the economic/diplomatic blockade:

- Support for the Muslim brotherhood and other political Islamist movements⁶ (AP, 2017; Asisian, 2018).
- Military and diplomatic relations with Iran, and joint military cooperation with Turkey (AP, 2017; Asisian, 2018).
- Support for proxy forces (in Syria, Somalia, and Libya) and terrorist groups (Hamas, Hezbollah, Al-Qaida) (AP, 2017; Asisian, 2018).
- Influence and information operations via Al Jazeera and other media outlets that challenge domestic Quartet governance (AP, 2017; Asisian, 2018).

While each Quartet actor has different centers of gravity with regard to these grievances, the most binding element is Qatar’s support for political Islamist movements (primarily the Muslim Brotherhood) and media influence that threatens the governing legitimacy of the Quartet (Cafiero, 2020; Kinninmont, 2019; Tremblay, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2020). These political actors/movements are outspoken critics of the Quartet regimes, and Qatar’s media influence can be used to undermine their governing legitimacy. Qatar’s relations with Iran and Turkey also concern Quartet states, and paradoxically the evolution of the rift has emboldened ties between Doha and Tehran and Ankara respectively, further raising tensions with the Quartet (Cafiero, 2020).

Doha has appealed to resolve the crisis diplomatically while denying much of the Quartet’s claimed grievances.⁷ At the same time, however, the Quartet has accused Qatar of persisting in its soft power exploits and support for Quartet political dissidents. Tensions escalated further in September 2019 when Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais were targeted by drone strikes, suspected to have been deployed by Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen (Arab Weekly, 2019). Qatar quickly condemned the attacks (Reuters, 2019), but suspicions emerged that Qatar may have had advance knowledge of the attack (Weinthal, 2019). This event is emblematic of the friction between Qatar and the Quartet, as Qatar’s perceived association with adversaries of the Quartet (whether real or imagined) and the perception that Qatar is “playing games [on both] sides” has led the Quartet to demand that Qatar can no longer “play to both masters” (i.e., Iran vs GCC) (Tsukerman, 2019).

Risk of Militarization

Even if the trade embargo is resolved, deep divisions and mistrust among Gulf countries are now likely to be a long-standing feature of wider regional politics. This adds further complications to a region that is already dealing with simultaneous civil wars, mounting tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and several insurgencies. — Kinninmont (2019)

Experts contend that the possibility for militarization in the Qatar-Quartet rift is low (Taleblu, 2020; Cafiero, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020). Roberts (2020), however, notes that this was “exactly the analytical consensus” before the diplomatic crisis began⁸. As long as tensions between Qatar and the Quartet endure, the risk for military escalation—however low—will persist as well, as both sides

⁶ Other movements include Ahrar al-Sham in northern Syria, religious insurrectionists in Libya, anti-Saudi and Shia communities in Saudi Arabia’s fractious eastern Qatif province, and Saudi-opposed Houthi rebels in Yemen (Rossi, 2019).

⁷ For example, Qatar has disputed that it supports terrorism (Reuters, 2017), while also levying Al Jazeera and other media outlets to disrupt Quartet legitimacy (Ulrichsen, 2020).

⁸ Roberts goes on to note that Qatar was convinced that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were preparing for a military response as the crisis unfolded.

view the core issues of the dispute as potentially threatening to the survival of their regimes.

Avenues of Conflict

Experts highlight three possible (albeit, unlikely) avenues of militarized conflict in the Qatar-Quartet rift, namely accidental confrontation, proxy entanglement, and an overt threat event to the regime security of a Quartet nation (Roberts, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020). Accidental escalation could entail an unintentional encounter between Qatari and Saudi/Emirati air forces, spurred on by ineffective diplomacy (Ulrichsen, 2020). As Qatar and the Quartet nations have significant ties to competing proxy forces in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and the Horn of Africa, the resulting tension could escalate into direct confrontation between Doha and the Quartet. Ulrichsen (2020) argues that Libya is the most likely flashpoint of militarization, as the UAE strongly supports General Khalifa Haftar⁹ while Qatar and Turkey are aligned with the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the direct link of proxy support could result in armed escalation within the Gulf itself. However, Roberts (2020) notes that Qatar has been decreasing its proxy commitment since 2016. Roberts argues that the most likely scenario of militarization could arise from a terrorist attack in the UAE, as any links between the attack and the Muslim Brotherhood could precipitate a military response. Similarly, Ulrichsen (2020) notes that Qatari support for exiled Saudi political dissidents in London would precipitate a major escalation from Riyadh's point of view that could result in a militarized confrontation.

Actor Interest Analysis

Understanding the salient interests of relevant actors that serve as buffers or drivers to military escalation of the rift helps contextualize the possibility of militarization. Furthermore, these interests can reveal potential areas of opportunity where the United States can advance its interests with respect to the rift.

Table 1: Assessing actor interests served by escalation and de-escalation of the Qatar-Quartet rift¹⁰

	Interests Served by De-Escalation	Interests Served by Escalation
Qatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain regional stability and Arab Gulf allies Maintain US as ally Protect access to regional economic opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Escape Saudi hegemony; assert independent foreign policy Bolster regional partnerships beyond Arab Gulf allies (Iran, Turkey, and Russia)
KSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure Arab cohesion and a united front in conflict with Iran Maintain regional and economic stability Avoid costly conflict that could threaten regime legitimacy Maintain US as ally Maintain GCC unity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat Qatari soft power threat to government legitimacy Combat proxy conflict with Qatar in Yemen and Syria, and competition regarding Palestinian issue Combat Iranian influence Reassert regional hegemony
UAE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain regional and economic stability Maintain US as ally Maintain GCC unity Avoid costly conflict that could threaten regime legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat Qatari soft power threat to government legitimacy Combat Iranian influence Combat proxy conflict with Qatar in Yemen, Syria, Libya

⁹ Ulrichsen goes further to posit that "Libya has replaced Yemen as Abu Dhabi's main focus for 2020."

¹⁰ It is difficult to predict the exact nature of potential militarization, as such the table summarizes whether escalation and de-escalation would serve the listed interest for each actor within their own strategic calculus.

Bahrain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain US as ally • Maintain GCC unity • Avoid costly conflict that could threaten regime legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat Qatari soft power threat to government legitimacy • Combat territorial disputes with Qatar
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain Quartet unity • Avoid risk of costly conflict that could threaten regime legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat Qatari ideological threat to government legitimacy
Oman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain GCC unity • Maintain US as ally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalation runs counter to most Omani interests
Kuwait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain GCC unity • Maintain US as ally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat Qatari soft power threat to government legitimacy
Iran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain regional and economic stability • De-escalation runs counter to most Iranian interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge Saudi regional hegemony • Bolster security and economic relations with Qatar • Create division within the GCC
Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain regional and economic stability • De-escalation runs counter to most Turkish interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bolster regional prestige • Maintain ally (Qatar) in support for Muslim Brotherhood • Increase proxy presence in Libya
US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain regional stability • Protect economic access to the region • Protect military presence • Contain Iranian influence • Promote united front against terrorism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalation runs counter to most US interests
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain regional economic stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalation runs counter to most Chinese interests
Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance energy interests, exploration of new resources and infrastructure development • Continue to establish regional influence while remaining in the role of a peaceful powerbroker with all of the countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the opportunities for arms sales • Expand the growing economic relationship with Qatar and start a more strategic military partnership

Buffers to Conflict by Country

Qatar Interests

The main reason why Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and/or the UAE will probably not invade or militarily strike Qatar pertain to Doha’s external alliances and partnerships. The presence of US and Turkish military forces in the blockaded Arabian emirate serves as strong deterrence to such aggression on the part of Qatar’s regional adversaries. — Cafiero (2020)

of the GCC is unlikely,¹³ citing joint military exercises in February 2019 in Saudi Arabia that included Qatari troops. Militarization of the rift would also jeopardize Qatar’s extensive security relationship with the US, which is central to Doha’s defense strategy (Cafiero, 2020; Katzman, 2019; Kinnimont, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2020).

Despite current and historic¹¹ tensions with GCC states, Qatar’s interests align with resolving the rift, restoring relations with the Quartet, and maintaining regional stability within the GCC framework. Ulrichsen (2020) contends that Qatar remains optimistic of rapprochement through the GCC, noting that a month after the strikes on Saudi Aramco facilities, Doha affirmed a declaration of common security with Saudi Arabia where “an attack on one is an attack on all.”¹² Kinnimont (2019) also believes that the dissolution

¹¹ Notably, a Saudi-Qatar border dispute in the early 1990s (Roberts, 2020), and Bahrain re-opening a border dispute with Qatar shortly following the blockade in 2017 (Al Jazeera, 2017).

¹² Ulrichsen goes on to describe this affirmation as a signal that if Qatar “ever had to choose between the GCC and Iran, [the affirmation] just proved that Qatar would choose the GCC.”

¹³ However, Kinnimont and Asisian (2018) both argue that the GCC needs to restructure to address its failure in governing the interests of member states.

Economically, Qatar has demonstrated resilience throughout the economic blockade (Cafiero, 2020; Katzman, 2019; Kinninmont, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2020); however, the embargo has induced domestic and economic pressures¹⁴ on the regime at a time when Doha is seeking to diversify its economy from dependence on petroleum production (Kinninmont, 2019). The embargo has ultimately induced Qatar to increase cooperation with Iran and Turkey, which has, in turn, strained Doha's alliance with the United States (Cafiero, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020).

Quartet Interests

As with Qatar, the Quartet nations similarly do not want to risk their defense relationships with the United States¹⁵ (Ulrichsen, 2020). There are also varying degrees of commitment to opposing Qatar within the Quartet. Bahrain¹⁶ and Egypt¹⁷ are more ancillary actors in the Quartet and do not have as strong of a commitment in the rift, and are thereby unlikely to engage in any military escalation (Ulrichsen, 2020). As Saudi Arabia is preoccupied with Iran and the new domestic agenda of King Mohammed Bin Salman, and the UAE is embroiled in the Yemeni conflict, both nations are hesitant to risk their regional alliances over escalation with Qatar (Ulrichsen, 2020). Ultimately, the militarization of the rift would likely be highly polarizing within the Quartet and would ultimately better serve the agendas of both Tehran and Ankara.

Other GCC Member Interests

Both Kuwait¹⁸ and Oman have more neutral outlooks on the rift and have consistently encouraged and facilitated mediation¹⁹ between Qatar and the Quartet, primarily through the GCC (Abdullah Baabood, 2018; Toumi, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2020). Both are also on friendlier terms with Iran than the Quartet, and militarization of the rift would make their relationships with the Tehran more untenable and further deteriorate the GCC (Abdullah Baabood, 2018; Ulrichsen, 2020).

Great Power Interests

The United States continues to actively work to limit state support for terrorism as well as limit Iranian influence. At the same time, the United States has a strong interest in maintaining stability among the current GCC members (Cafiero, 2020; Kabalan, 2018). US interests are best served by maintaining peace and ongoing economic access to the region, its shipping lanes, and its resources (Asisian, 2018). The situation in Qatar is, of course, complicated by the presence of the al-Udeid Air Force Base, which is not only one of the largest overseas US military installations but is also a central point for US operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the rest of the region. While Qatar may have expected preferential treatment in exchange for the base, the United States does have a strong interest in maintaining its operational presence (Roberts, 2020). The Qatari government has recently agreed to expand operations at al-Udeid, as a gesture to assure the United States that it is committed to continue to fight terrorism (Katzman, 2019). This helps to further US interests for both a regional presence

¹⁴ In addition to substantial losses to Qatar Airways (Ulrichsen, 2020), the blockade has "separated families and caused other social disruptions" (Katzman, 2019).

¹⁵ Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain all have several bases hosting thousands of US troops (Ayesh, 2020).

¹⁶ However, both Ulrichsen and Cafiero note that Bahrain has increasingly fallen under the yolk of Saudi and Emirati control.

¹⁷ Ulrichsen denotes that Cairo did not concede the expulsion of Qatari citizens from Egypt.

¹⁸ Kuwait has also denounced Qatari support for Kuwaiti oppositionists, "but has called for the dispute to be resolved diplomatically" (Kinninmont, 2019).

¹⁹ Ulrichsen referenced Qatari optimism on the appointment of a Kuwaiti as the new secretary general of the GCC to resolve the rift.

and a unified GCC in the fight against terrorism. Stronger cooperation between Qatar and the United States, in terms of both combating terrorism and maintaining a regional military operations capability, will likely help to inhibit escalation of the Qatar-Quartet rift into a military conflict, absent any major or dramatic incidents between Qatar and its neighbors.

Limiting Iranian influence in the region is another strong interest of the United States. Maintaining a strong and cooperative relationship across the GCC can help to limit opportunities for Iran to gain strategic inroads. However, Qatar is likely to be primarily motivated by a desire to protect itself (Taleblu, 2020; Tsukerman, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2020). If the rift deepens, or if the government of Qatar feels that it has become more isolated, it may invite a stronger presence from Iran, as Qatar has historically looked to stronger alliances for protection (Ulrichsen, 2019).

Russia has burgeoning economic relationships with Qatar and with all Quartet nations that would likely be hampered by militarization of the rift in a time of economic fragility for Moscow (Rumer, 2019). Beyond the economic sphere, both Russia and China do not have significant levers of influence in the rift (Roberts, 2020). Vladimir Putin personally phoned the Qatari Emir after President Trump tweeted support for the Saudis and Emiratis in the rift (which “sent shockwaves” through Doha) to encourage mediation, however Ulrichsen (2020) contends that this was done merely to exploit what Moscow perceived as a “crack appearing in what had been a solidly US network of defense and security and political interest.” China would also likely encourage a diplomatic resolution to the crisis in order to promote energy and regional economic stability (Cafiero, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

Drivers of Conflict by Country

Qatar Interests

Despite their well-disciplined foreign policy operation, Qatar’s political elite has an exaggerated idea of self-importance and hubris dealing with other states and social groups. Qatar’s activities are not based on their inherent strength, they are based on the inherent weaknesses of its position within the regional balance of power. The nature of the problem has not changed which is—Qatar is a weak state with limited power. — Asisian (2018)

As a small country with 90% of its population consisting of expats²⁰ (Reaboi, 2019), Qatar enjoys an almost “total lack of anxiety about domestic opposition” that affords it the ability to engage in an aggressive foreign policy (Kinninmont, 2019). Doha exerts regionally antagonistic influence through various media outlets, cyber operations, lobbying and information operations, and other exploits of soft power (Reaboi, 2019). Qatar uses these mechanisms to bolster its small regional

status and deter regional bullying from Riyadh in order to ensure the continued rule of the house of Al Thani (Asisian, 2018; Cafiero, 2020; Kinninmont, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020). Qatar seeks to assert an independent foreign policy that is free from the thumb of regional Saudi hegemony (Asisian, 2018), and considering that Riyadh has been implicated in two coup attempts,²¹ Doha’s activities can be viewed as method of ensuring regime survival²² (Ulrichsen, 2017).

²⁰ The Qatari citizenry is only approximately 300,000 in a population of 2.3 million (Kinninmont, 2019).

²¹ One in 1996 and the other in 2005 against the former Qatari Al Thani Emir (Ulrichsen, 2017).

²² Katzman (2019) also writes that “Qatar has at times also used its military forces to try to shape the outcome of regional conflicts.”

Qatar's engagement and cooperation with Iran and Turkey will likely continue as long as the Quartet's blockade is in place, as Qatar depends on such alliances to ensure sovereignty in a region dominated by the Saudi-UAE bloc (Ulrichsen, 2020). Qatar's relations with Iran are grounded in their joint ownership of the largest gas field in the world (North Dome/South Pars), and Doha's considerable economic dependency on petroleum production necessitates continued cooperation (Abdullah Baabood, 2018; Ulrichsen, 2020). The Quartet's insistence on the withdrawal of Turkey's military presence²³ from Qatari soil is also unlikely to be successful in the current climate, and while this and the Chinese-sold SY-400 ballistic missile system has served as a deterrent to military escalation from the Quartet, it is also a persistent aggravating circumstance that prolongs the current tension (Roberts, 2020). The more threatened Qatar feels, the more likely Doha will be to enact soft power exploits and increase security cooperation with Iran and Turkey to an extent that could trigger military confrontation from the Quartet.

Quartet Interests

The same actions that Qatar considers to be defense mechanisms from Quartet aggression encapsulate the core grievances of the Quartet. In the unlikely event of militarized escalation of the rift, Quartet actors would have the opportunity to eliminate Qatari hostility. While this could come at a considerable cost to Quartet members, there are conceivable scenarios where Saudi Arabia and the UAE would find military escalation to be a reasonable course of action. As the regional hegemon, Saudi Arabia would be best equipped to escalate, and given the current tension with Iran, it is reasonable to assume that Riyadh may escalate to military confrontation if it perceives an overt threat to its regional power status.²⁴

Regional Actors

Tehran sees its ability to fan the flames of the Gulf crisis as tactical and not strategic. The ultimate overachieving tools at present appear to be diplomatic and informational. In areas where material support to an entity backed by Qatar against the GCC may arise, any Iranian support would be predicated and motivated by the ability to disrupt perceived Western and specifically Saudi and American security and interests. — Taleblu (2020)

While Ulrichsen (2020) argues that Iran is more likely to play an indirect role in shaping narratives and opinions rather than serving as a flashpoint for conflict, Iran stands to gain from continued Qatar-Quartet tensions. Sowing further division in the GCC emphasizes Tehran's narrative that Saudi Arabia's regional hegemony jeopardizes the interests of Arab Gulf nations (Taleblu, 2020). Turkey, on the other hand, is seeking to project its influence and demonstrate that it is a capable

security partner regionally. Ankara likely fears that a potential rapprochement between Qatar and the Quartet would diminish Turkey's prestige and military partnership with Doha (Tremblay, 2019).

Great Power Interests

Russia is the only great power positioned to benefit from further escalation of the rift. Russia would likely utilize the same playbook it employs in other regions to advance its influence and opportunistically increase military,²⁵ diplomatic, and economic cooperation with any states that are willing to engage (Ulrichsen, 2020). Russia would also benefit from the likely disruption in regional petroleum production, as well an opportunity to crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood activity in the North Caucasus (Rumer, 2019).

²³ Specifically, a newly constructed military base in Qatar, in November of 2019 with 5,000 Turkish troops stationed (Al Jazeera, 2019).

²⁴ In 2018, Qatar was in discussions to purchase the S-400 sophisticated air defense system from Russia that has since been stalled by US sanctions (Katzman, 2019). The Saudi response to the possibility was revealed in a letter to French President Emmanuel Macron noting that the Kingdom would take all necessary measures "including military action," to prevent the acquisition (Reuters, 2018).

²⁵ Roberts details that a "putative offer to Russia for the stationing of some forces is also not to be dismissed."

What Can USCENTCOM Do?

It becomes crucial before disagreements within the GCC pass the point of no return, that the United States Department of State in collaboration with the Department of Defense actively try to defuse the situation and search for a lasting solution. — Asisian (2018)

All Arab Gulf actors have a security and defense relationship with the United States that is central to their strategic outlook. The United States, therefore, is uniquely positioned to affect regional cooperation within the GCC as USCENTCOM has considerable leverage at its disposal. The United States' ambivalent and mixed messaging throughout the evolution of the rift, however, has increased instability within the region and has weakened the perception of US resolve to ensure GCC stability (Asisian, 2018). More decisive

mediation toward a diplomatic resolution to the rift could signal to Arab Gulf nations that the United States is committed to the GCC structure, and the considerable presence and leverage the United States possesses with Arab Gulf nations could be used to consolidate a cohesive Arab front against Iran (Ulrichsen, 2020). Tehran is seeking to exploit GCC disunity and advance the narrative that Saudi Arabia is an aggressive and unilateral actor in the region fueled by the United States (Ben Taleblu, 2020). USCENTCOM could advance GCC unity and increase mil-mil cooperation and security partnerships, which all Arab Gulf regimes are seeking, in order to disarm Tehran's information warfare and influence among Arab Gulf nations (Ben Taleblu, 2020).

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