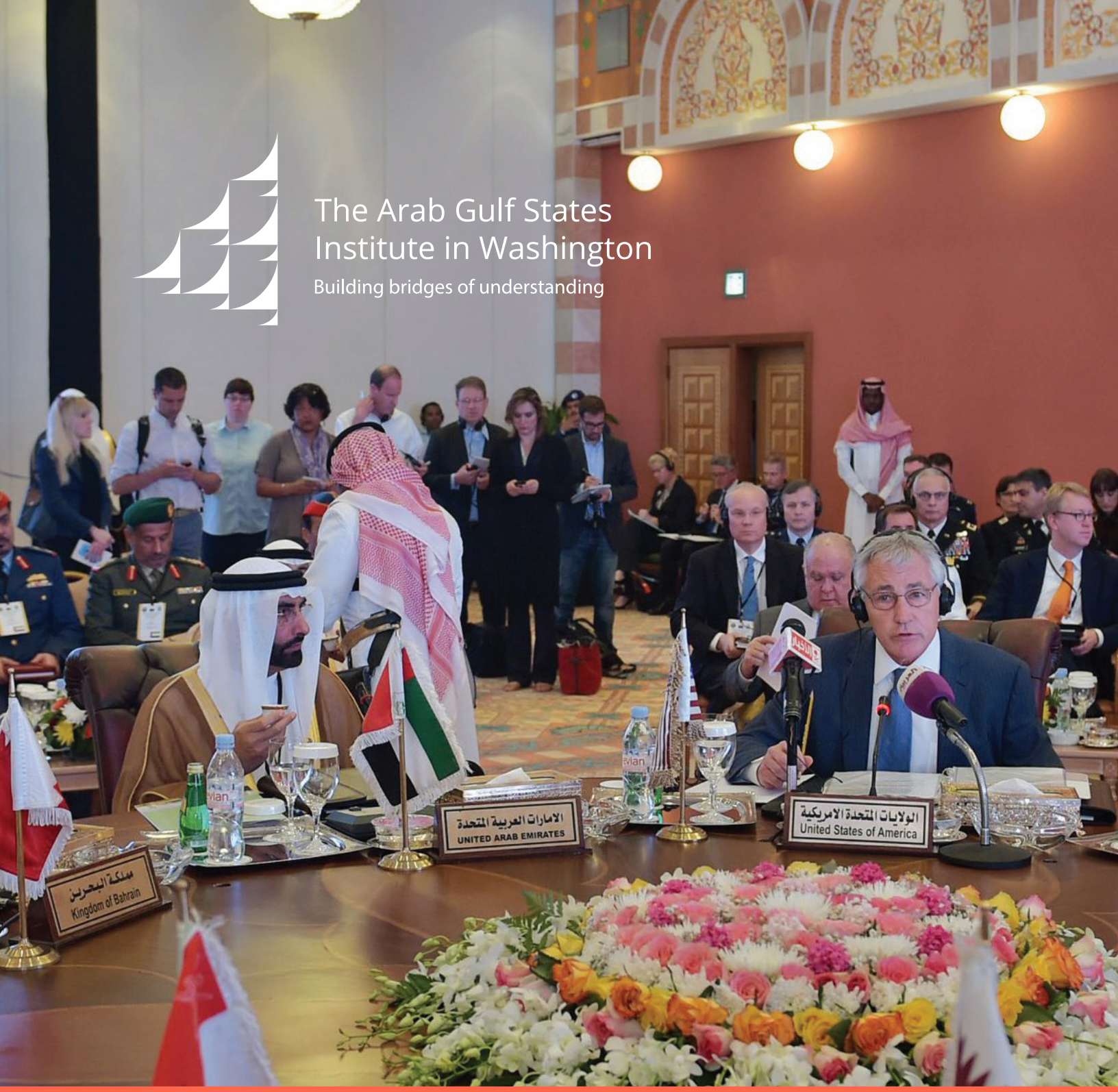

Gulf Security Through Arab Eyes

Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm, Jr

The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), established in 2014, is an independent, non-profit institution dedicated to increasing the understanding and appreciation of the social, economic, and political diversity of the Arab Gulf states. Through expert research, analysis, exchanges, and public discussion, the Institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform decision makers shaping U.S. policy regarding this critical geo-strategic region.

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The Arab states of the Persian Gulf are often in the news and are critically important to the United States. The media and the political universe give great attention to how the world sees this region but little to how those who live there perceive the world and the environment around them. I will take a look here at the world and the regional environment from the perspective of the six Arab states that compose the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman.

The GCC states share many attributes, interests, and concerns, though each has its own unique history, location, and experiences that shape its perceptions of its surroundings and the developments that could threaten the state. In examining the issues and challenges that these countries face, I hope to capture both the perspectives they share and those in which they differ.

The Arab states of the Gulf region are, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, small and vulnerable to threats from outside and within their borders. All perceive the world around them to be in a "State of War" (Dar al-Harb); a place where political turmoil and sectarian differences threaten the stable and rather passive environment that they have constructed and in which they survive and for the most part thrive. When regional threats intensify, the six GCC countries tend to rally together. At the same time, their own unique circumstances, especially including their different domestic environments and their relations with other countries in the region, lead them to approach moves toward genuine integration with much hesitation and procrastination. For example, efforts to create a common currency, a central bank, and even a tighter military command structure have languished in rhetorical dialogue.

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Four major developments, all of which have occurred with the last 35 years, loom large in understanding the anxieties and concerns in the region: the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the U.S. military intervention and occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011, the Arab uprisings of late 2010 to 2012, and the sudden successes of Daesh (the so-called Islamic State) in Syria and then in Iraq beginning in December 2013.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979)

For the Gulf region, 1979 was a tumultuous year. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Demonstrations in Tehran led to the abdication of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Historically the Arab states in the region have viewed Iran (or Persia) as a threatening neighbor – a country that asserted a right to a dominant position in the Gulf. The Shah spent 20 years significantly enhancing his country's military capabilities in alliance with its U.S. ally. Gulf Arabs may have resented the Shah but at least they could identify with Iran as a monarchy and nominally Muslim state.

Iran after the Islamic Revolution was another matter. Not only did the new regime declare its revolution sacred, its clerical leaders insisted its Islamic credentials were superior to those of others who claimed to lead the Muslim world (read the Saudis). There were public demonstrations accusing the Saudi royal family and other Sunni ruling families in the Gulf of being apostate Muslims and calling for their overthrow. For several years, Iranian pilgrims held anti-Saudi and anti-American demonstrations during the annual hajj, a deeply religious journey compulsory for all Muslims at least once in a lifetime. The Saudi government had to use force to re-establish order. But the most frightening attack was the attempt by a violent Wahhabi faction to take control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. A fanatical military commander, who some Saudi leaders believed was encouraged by the revolution in Iran, led the attack. The Grand Mosque was secured but only after intense fighting and loss of life.

Saudi Arabia was not the only Arab country to feel Iranian belligerency. In 1983, in the midst of the Iraq-Iran war, a group of mostly Iraqi Shia extremists based in Iran and led by Lebanese Hezbollah militants bombed the U.S. and French Embassies in Kuwait. In 1985 a Shia extremist attempted to assassinate the emir of Kuwait. During the Iraq-Iran war, Iran fired missiles that hit a Kuwaiti refinery and targeted Kuwaiti oil tankers. Further south, the Iranian government intensified its occupation of three islands claimed by the UAE. Tehran also backed an attempt to overthrow the Sunni-dominated government in Bahrain.

Yet the big nightmare for the Arab states of the Gulf was the real and assumed influence claimed by Iran over their Shia minorities. The Sunni Gulf states have long suspected – with little evidence – that their Shia populations were secretly loyal to Shia Iran, despite the fact that most Gulf Shia were Arab, not Persian, and were generally loyal to the governments under which they lived. They assumed their Shia populations were a fifth column that Iran could use to destabilize or even overthrow existing Sunni regimes – a threat repeatedly made by Iran's revolutionary leaders, including most recently former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Since the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic projects himself as the protector of Shia Muslims everywhere, Sunni Gulf leaders are convinced that the hand of Iran is behind any and all difficulties they might be having with their Shia minorities. This feeling remains particularly acute in Bahrain, where the Shia are 65 to 70 percent of the population, as well as in Saudi Arabia.

Senior Iranian officials periodically announce that Iran wants only the best relations with the Arab states of the Gulf, but suspicion remains that Iranian intentions are to subvert Sunni regimes and ultimately dominate the Gulf region and beyond.

The United States' War on Saddam Hussein and Occupation of Iraq

The U.S. military action in Iraq beginning in 2003 was a cataclysmic event for the entire region, but especially alarming to the Arab states of the Gulf. The intervention toppled the Sunni dominated regime and destroyed governance in the country. The George W. Bush administration's determination to establish democracy in Iraq led ultimately to an elected central government dominated by Iraq's majority Shia population. Though the GCC states fought Iraq to liberate Kuwait in 1991, historically they saw Sunni Arab Iraq as a bulwark against Persian hegemonic intentions. However, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states watched in horror as the U.S. intervention in Iraq reaped civil chaos, and worst of all, virtually gave Iraq to Iran, an accusation still made today.

Saudi Arabia, whose sympathies and support lay with the Sunni Arab tribes and leaders of north and western Iraq, saw the hand of Iran behind decisions of the government in Baghdad. The Saudis especially railed against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for his failure to incorporate the Sunni militia that had defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2007 into the military as promised, his close association with the major Shia political leaders in Iran, and his tolerance for Iranian meddling in Iraq's political and security issues. They were especially provoked by Maliki's arrests of senior Sunni Arab political leaders, including his vice president. There still is no Saudi ambassador or embassy in Baghdad.

Other GCC states were more willing to deal with Baghdad. The Kuwaitis wanted a relationship that minimized friction and reinforced a non-confrontational relationship with the country that had repeatedly claimed Kuwait was part of Iraq. In 2014, Kuwait supported an end to the restrictions placed on Iraq by the U.N. Security Council after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The UAE and Oman, located further down the Gulf, were more forgiving of Baghdad. But all these states had concerns about the new and seemingly strong influence of Iran in Iraq.

The Arab Spring

If the new aggressive Islamic Republic in Iran and the destabilized and Shia dominated Iraq were not enough, enter 2011 and the so-called Arab Spring! Popular uprisings that began in Tunisia and quickly spread to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya altered the region's political landscape but, more importantly in the Gulf, raised questions about the legitimacy of even Gulf governments.

Various factors led to the uprisings. For the first time the people in the region rose up against their autocratic leaders and repressive governments to demand justice, transparency, and an end to the unremitting corruption and brutality these regimes used on their own people. They demanded democratic governance, official accountability, and economic opportunity for all, not just for the few.

We know the initial results. The presidents in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were forced out. Political transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen resulted in widespread domestic unrest and instability. In the Gulf, the Arab Spring posed two serious issues. First, many of the issues that drove populations into the streets in Egypt and Tunisia, were and remain issues for citizens in the Gulf states: large youth

populations and high unemployment, lack of transparent governance, and heavy handed responses to dissent, ongoing corruption, human rights violations, and ruling families who refuse to share power. Secondly, Arab governments in the Gulf were particularly alarmed at the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Gulf states had hosted Egyptian and Syrian Brotherhood leaders who had sought safe haven over the last three decades only to have these "guests" develop local followers and spread their brand of religious extremism. The Gulf Arab states had two new crises to address: how to deal with their own populations, with their popular aspirations and demands for change, and how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members had embedded themselves in their countries' educational institutions and political culture, and now threatened the political order in these countries.

The Gulf Arab states responded to both threats. In Oman protests in the port city of Sohar largely over economic issues were suppressed; the sultan's government took action to alleviate the demands of protesters while, at the same time, messaging that unrest would not be tolerated. Saudi Arabia responded by announcing a multibillion dollar program to create jobs and housing and showered citizens with higher salaries and more social welfare benefits. Kuwait and the UAE followed a similar path. The situation in Bahrain with its Sunni dominated government and majority Shia population reached an impasse that led to the deployment of Saudi and Emirati troops to reinforce the government's position and intimidate the population. Saudi Arabia and the UAE declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and arrested citizens and expatriates they believed were supporting it.

The Rise of the Islamic State

In June 2014, to the shock of much of the world, an extremist Salafi group fighting in Iraq and Syria, calling itself the Islamic State, captured Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, giving it control of one-third of Iraq over six months. Fears that Irbil and even Baghdad could soon fall raised the threat of a Sunni Arab extremist takeover.

Daesh, as I prefer to call it, openly challenges the legitimacy of all the governments in the region. Espousing the establishment of a caliphate based on Quranic tenets, it labels existing governments and leaders as illegitimate, apostate. All will be destroyed, replaced by the new caliphate unless they (Sunni Muslims, of course) surrender to the new caliphate. Most people in the region perceived immediately the seriousness of the threat. The ideology of Daesh resonates with the Wahhabi view of Islam, its history, its precepts, and the world. So Saudi Arabia, with its extensive global outreach over past years preaching the Wahhabi viewpoint, is finding itself confronted by an organization using the tenets of Wahhabism to undermine the Saudi state. Further, most of the countries in the region realize that there are a number of their own citizens who support the Islamic caliphate – politically and financially – creating delicate domestic problems on top of an already heightened concern over the Muslim Brotherhood.

All of This Comes Home

As the GCC countries look about them, the region they see is chaotic and threatening – governments collapsing in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, citizens demanding change, Islamic movements questioning states' legitimacy, and falling oil prices.

At the same time, Iran appears stronger, successfully advancing its power and influence around

them. Now it is south of Saudi Arabia in Yemen. There, the Houthi movement, a splinter group of Shia Islam, has seized power in Sanaa. It has ties with Iran, and Iran, the opportunistic power that it is, has gone to all ends to portray itself as a supporter and provider of arms and money. In Saudi (and Gulf Arab) minds the Iranians now have a front on the underbelly of the Arabian Peninsula and, more importantly, one immediately adjacent to Saudi Arabia. With Yemen's population larger and poorer than all the other states on the peninsula combined, its porous borders, its dire economic situation, and the chilling presence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, concern over the collapse of all authority in the country portends a disaster of major import for the region.

Iranian influence is seen growing in Iraq where senior Iranian officials are actively assisting the Iraqi government in responding to the confrontation with Daesh. Iran is supporting the resurgence of Shia militias and the Kurds with weapons, air power, and ground forces that have been able to recover some territory. Yet in doing so, there are disturbing reports that, when they "liberate" Sunni villages, they have either killed or "cleansed" (dispossessed) the Sunni population, alleging that as Sunni Arabs they must be supporters of Daesh. Such action seriously undercuts efforts by the new prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, in Baghdad to entice the Sunni Arab tribes of western Iraq to turn away from the militant group and join in turning back Daesh. Observers – including the U.S. government – stress that regaining the loyalty, or at least, the fighting support, of the Sunni tribes is essential to successful action against Daesh.

In Syria and its neighbor, Lebanon, the Arab states of the Gulf see their interests undermined by the strong and active support of Iran and Russia for President Bashar al-Assad and for the close ties that Iran has with Hezbollah. Their consternation, indeed frustration, is confounded by Russia's substantial support for Syria and the seeming lack of a similar U.S. commitment to the resistance.

As the Arab states of the Gulf seek ways to confront an increasingly threatening regional scene, they are grappling domestically with the ongoing ripples in the oil market and the expenses of the Arab Spring. Those states with significant financial resources are using them liberally to placate their people; but the recent fall in oil prices and its devastating impact on revenue call into question how long these governments can continue to resort to their traditional approach of buying their way out of crises. Most of these states subsidize essentials – food, energy, education, and health care – all benefits that are hard to terminate without backlash. Moreover, oil producing states are rapidly consuming ever more of their own production at a cheap price, further reducing what they can export for revenue. Finally there remains the unknown: How long can state hand-outs placate supporters and critics among the citizenry? How and when will these states respond to calls within their own states for reform?

So where do the GCC states turn for security?

Enter the United States or Find the United States?

For decades the United States has been the principal guarantor of security in the Gulf. The iconic event was the famous meeting of President Franklin D. Roosevelt with Saudi King Abdul Aziz al-Saud in 1945. Out of that meeting and friendship came the informal understanding between the two countries of oil for security. The United States established a naval presence in 1948 in Bahrain. U.S. oft-emphasized interests in the region were and remain the free flow of oil to global markets, Israel's security, and the support of friends of the United States.

The Gulf Arab states continue to see the United States as an indispensable ally and protector and there

is no alternative at this point. Yet the relationship has had its ups and downs. Clearly U.S. support for shipping during the Iran-Iraq War and the U.S.-led coalition that liberated Kuwait stand as highpoints, as do the current efforts to contain Daesh. On the other hand, these states have real doubts about U.S. reliability. They interpreted the failure of the United States to support the shah and Mubarak as failures to support friends, raising doubts as to whether the United States will be there for them in their time of need. They were also perplexed that the United States did not seem to comprehend the threat that might follow the fall of the Iranian monarchy or the defeat of Saddam Hussein. Was the United States a dependable ally? Would it be there to save them?

Today the same questions arise coupled with a sense that the United States does not think through the consequences of its actions or non-actions. Trust in the United States to manage situations is in question. In Syria, the United States joined the Gulf Arab states (and others) in calling for the end of the Assad regime. Yet, the United States, in their minds, does not seem committed to take the actions needed to achieve that end. They were especially upset when President Barack Obama failed to take military action when the Syrian government crossed his red line and used chemical weapons on its citizens. In fact, they wonder if toppling Assad remains a U.S. objective.

And then there is Iran. The new opening between United States and Iran came as a total surprise when it became public that Oman had arranged a secret meeting between the two countries. U.S. negotiations with the P5 + Germany over Iran's nuclear program have left the GCC states confused and uncertain. Those states generally oppose Iran obtaining nuclear weapons capability and they certainly prefer a peaceful resolution to the issue than a military one that would embroil their region in yet another war. Yet, they harbor a belief (bordering on a phobia) that, in truth, the United States sees a relationship with Iran as more important than a relationship with them. They worry that they have been kept uninformed by Washington regarding intentions toward Tehran – and that decisions directly affecting their security will be taken without them being consulted.

Two other developments heighten the Gulf's sense of insecurity and intensify doubts of U.S. reliability. As U.S. oil production increases and U.S. oil imports from Saudi Arabia, in particular, decrease, the question is raised whether the oil for security partnership can survive. Political statements in Washington that trumpet U.S. oil production as ending the need to buy oil from "unreliable" or "hostile" states (clearly implying Saudi Arabia) add to anxieties. Secondly, the administration's pronouncement that the United States would be "pivoting" to Asia intensified uncertainty about U.S. intentions in the Gulf. U.S. allies in the Gulf were quick to interpret this new policy as a sign that the United States would reduce its presence in and attention to the Gulf – raising yet again the question whether the United States is a reliable security partner.

It is critical for the United States to grasp how it is viewed in the region. A Washington Post story highlighted the mistrust of U.S. policies in the region. The article quotes Mustafa Alani of the Gulf Research Center in Dubai: "We have reached a low point in trust in this administration." The article explains that such a view is rooted in three years of increased U.S. disengagement, beginning with the turmoil engendered by the Arab Spring. The author notes that different countries are suspicious for different reasons, but all feel betrayed in some way. Some cite Obama's warning of military action against Syria if the regime used chemical weapons. Yet he backed off when the Syrian government did use chemical weapons. Others point to the U.S. failure to supply moderate Syrian resistance with arms after promising repeatedly to do so. These people argue that this failure created the conditions that enabled Daesh to thrive. Sunni leaders also criticize continued U.S. support for Maliki in Iraq even after his partisan approach seemed to be tearing Iraq apart – again pointing out that this fueled the

ascent of militants in Iraq.

The Gulf Arab states have no alternative at present to the security relationship with the United States. However, there loom significant concerns and doubts about the United States: its commitment to its friends in the region and its understanding of the region's complexities. There remain common causes – security for oil supplies to the global market and now, in particular, action to counter Daesh and al-Qaeda. Yet these states are also acting more aggressively to protect themselves and their perceived interests in the face of calculations that they cannot be certain of U.S. support or actions. As a consequence there have been and will continue to be public statements and actions by these states that either appear to be or are at odds with U.S. views. The best example is the U.S. dialogue with Iran.

Conclusion

Arab states in the Gulf perceive threats from other regional parties, like Iran and Daesh, and from the very evident desire among people in the region for political reform and change. Yes, regimes focus on survival; but their people also want stability and economic wellbeing. In presenting their perspective I am not necessarily accepting their views. I do not, for example, believe these states are accurate in seeing the hand of Shia Iran behind all Shia unrest. Their treatment of their own minorities has, in my opinion, more to do with the unrest than Iran. Not all of their anxieties are unfounded, however. With the Gulf Arab states questioning U.S. policy, they can be expected to make decisions and take actions that they believe are required to survive and protect their countries from the disorders surrounding them. Their actions will not always be in accordance with stated U.S. policies. They are not, however, intentionally intending to undercut U.S. policy, but to address the situations that they see as threatening.

If the United States is going to have an effective policy in the region, then regional support is essential. The United States needs to intensify its dialogue with these states – dialogue that will reassure them of U.S. intentions and commitment to the region and to their security and that convey to them that the United States is listening to their concerns. Only in that way is there hope to find common ground for collective action against common threats.