

## The Gulf States' Foreign Policies

**Summary of a briefing with Dr. Karen E. Young**  
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On December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016 the Mitvim Institute and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung hosted [Dr. Karen E. Young](#) of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington for a briefing titled “The Interventionist Turn in Gulf Foreign Policies and the Economic Drivers of Change.” The briefing focused on local, regional and international causes for the changing dynamics of Gulf states’ foreign policies. Specific attention was paid to the use of economic statecraft and willingness to use military force by the Gulf states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region, and to the changing relations between the different Gulf states. The participants in the briefing also discussed the budding ties between the Gulf states and Israel, and the opportunities presented through the current geo-political situation in the Middle East. This document presents some of the key points discussed in the briefing.

### **A. Root Causes of Change in Gulf States’ Foreign Policies**

The root causes of the change seen in the Gulf states’ foreign policies can be found at three levels: (1) The Gulf states domestic politics, and resulting reactionary behavior from the fall-out caused by the Arab Spring, is bringing about an “Order and Development” agenda on the local level. This agenda is creating an environment of securitization within both the public and private spheres of many Gulf States; (2) On the regional level, violence, disorder and chaos have fed a narrative of a threatening Iran and a counter-narrative of religious identity as opposition to Iran; (3) On the international level, the oil boom years that led to massive wealth accumulation between 2003 and 2014 have resulted in an increase in fiscal expansion, infrastructure and state-building, and have significantly increased military budgets. This, together with the rise of young and new leadership, has ushered in a new period of confidence among Gulf states. The integration of the Gulf states into international markets and institutions has become a top priority for the viability of these states in the medium to long term.

### **B. Military and Economic Intervention in the MENA Region**

The interventionist foreign policy approach being carried out by Gulf states is evident across the region through a ‘carrot and stick’ policy. The willingness of the Gulf states to engage in military interventions has become evident in Bahrain in 2011, in Yemen since 2015, as well as in the current international air campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. This has been made possible by massive investment in arms by Gulf states following the immense wealth accumulated through its oil-based economy, which is continuing to increase over time.

It is important to emphasize economic statecraft as a tool in the Gulf states approach to foreign policy issues. This is evident especially in the case of Egypt, which has received substantial economic aid, investment and loans originating from the Gulf states. Such an economic tool carries the expectations of results from the governments that receive aid, creating a transactional approach between the Gulf states and the beneficiaries. This approach does not always succeed, as a shift in policy and economic performance in the recipient state is not always in line with Gulf state visions. The Gulf vision is one of “value for money” in that foreign aid and assistance is meant to also benefit the donor.

In regards to North Africa, Gulf states were pushed to curtail their spending there, due to domestic economic concerns as well as the advent of challenges closer to home, in Yemen and Syria. This is especially evident in Tunisia, where since the early days of the Arab Spring, more limited political and economic investment by Gulf states has been taking place.

### **C. Increased Bilateral Security and Economic Ties Between Gulf States**

The very fundamentals of the interactions between the Gulf states is changing. Bilateral security and economic ties between Gulf states continue to weaken the Gulf Cooperation Council's operational capacity. This development, especially with regard to economic relationships, is crucial moving forward as low oil prices will likely force Gulf states into further economic reform measures. Partnerships in reform, and mirroring of reform policies will have long term consequences in the institutional design of Gulf political economies. While the GCC has its fissures, there is also an increase in bilateral security ties between the Gulf states. This is most evident in the Saudi-led anti-terror coalition, also known as the Islamic Military Alliance, and the Saudi-led operation in Yemen. There could be increasing fissure points in managing the conflict between UAE and Saudi forces, and additional pressure points in the inclusion of other regional block members like Oman in the anti-terror coalition.

### **D. The Gulf and the United States**

The transactional and bilateral foreign policy of the Gulf states is a reflection of a global trend within international relations, and it will also change the nature of the Gulf states' relationship with the United States. President-elect Donald Trump is a prime example of a world leader intending on having a similar foreign policy approach, one that is likely to be less stable and more based on long term alliances between states. It is an approach that essentially shows a lack of political commitment that was once taken for granted from the United States to its allies in the Gulf. This is despite the fact that American military presence in the Gulf continues to grow as do arms sales from the United States to the Gulf states.

The Gulf states have also invested heavily in think-tanks and public relations efforts in Washington D.C. in order to better present their views and interests on important issues to the United States public and government. This can be seen as a response to the current American popular discourse, which can tend to be anti-Gulf, anti-Arab and anti-Middle East in general.

### **E. Post-Conflict Reconstruction**

The Gulf states have significant experience in building cities from scratch, rather than in projects of reconstruction in post-conflict zones. As the Gulf states take on more responsibility in post-conflict reconstruction in Yemen and possibly Iraq and Syria, there

could be significant regional impact based on their models of state-building. These models tend to be infrastructure-centered, rather than citizen-centered. A prime example to this is the Qatari investment in Rawabi, a brand new Palestinian city, which was built in the West Bank. The Gulf state development model, especially if exported regionally, will have to accommodate more diverse citizen populations, and existing urban centers and political institutions.

#### **F. The Gulf States and Israel**

The new foreign policy approach by the Gulf states is also affecting their budding relationship with Israel, which is becoming more integrated into the Middle East. As the Gulf states expand their foreign policy capacity, and with the advent of a rising Iran, there is possibility for increased cooperation and warming of ties between Israel and the Gulf states. But, as with the changing dynamic within the GCC itself, so does the possibility for cooperation with Israel vary from state to state. The opportunity for increased cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states reflects a secondary priority placed on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the Gulf states. This may also lead to cooperation on any possible "Arab Marshall Plan" where Israel and the Gulf States have shared interests, specifically in the economic sectors of technology, agriculture, and security. Nevertheless, a genuine breakthrough between Israel and the Gulf states is unlikely before progress is made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.