

Written Statement submitted by Stephen A. Seche, Senior Analyst, Dentons US LLP

House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on May 22, 2014:

"The Gulf Cooperation Council: Deepening Rifts and Emerging Challenges"

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutsch, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I am very pleased to be able to take part in today's hearing, which offers a timely opportunity to assess the state of US relations with the Arab Gulf states, and the nature of the relationships these nations maintain with each other. In the first instance, much has been made in recent months of the rift between Washington and some of our key Gulf allies, in particular, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, because of unhappiness over US policy on some key issues in the region.

We know very well what these policies are: our unwillingness to provide lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition; our participation in the P5+1 negotiations designed to prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon, and Washington's decision to support the popular revolt in Egypt that led to the ouster of long-time ally, Hosni Mubarak, and the emergence of a Muslim Brotherhood-led government.

These developments prompt two questions: are these differences real, and are they capable of inflicting permanent damage to our relationships with key Gulf partners? The answer to the first question is yes, Gulf anxiety about US policies in the region is genuine and needs to be addressed. As for the extent of damage these differences can inflict, I think the answer has got to be very little if we tend to our relationships carefully, explain ourselves clearly, and leave no doubt that our commitment to Gulf security and stability is as strong today as it has been since that historic moment in February 1945 when FDR sat with Abdul Aziz ibn Saud aboard the USS Quincy and laid the foundation for a relationship that has become one of the most important the US maintains anywhere in the world.

If the Administration can be faulted, I believe it is for failing to respond promptly to the clear signals of impatience and concern issued by our GCC partners, particularly the Saudis, and for too often seeming to think that a public statement of support delivered by an Administration spokesman standing in a briefing room in Washington DC would be sufficient to put Gulf anxieties to rest. That clearly is not the case.

That said, I also believe that the Administration has made up for its slow start by assembling an impressive list of senior-level visitors to the region, from the President and the secretaries of Commerce, State and Defense, to a host of other officials from the White House and executive-branch agencies. In fact, Defense Secretary Hagel just returned from Jeddah, where he convened a meeting of Gulf defense chiefs, a forum he made clear last December at the Manama Dialogue he wanted to revive. This kind of personal diplomacy is essential and must be sustained.

In his remarks in Jeddah, Secretary Hagel made a point that I think merits repeating: US engagement with the Gulf states "is intended to support and facilitate, not replace, stronger multilateral ties within

the Gulf Cooperation Council." This is, in my judgment, absolutely the right direction for the US to take. Our friends in the Gulf expect to be treated like mature, reliable partners, and one way for them to demonstrate that maturity is to assume a much greater share of the burden for their own defense by overcoming internal differences and working together.

This should not be construed as America walking away from its commitments to the security of the Gulf. We will maintain our forward military presence, which includes 35,000 servicemen and women, our Navy's Fifth Fleet, advanced fighter aircraft, sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, and a wide array of missile defense capabilities. But the most effective way for our Gulf partners to complement the advanced weaponry, air assets and human resources the US has placed at their disposal is to develop an effective and collective regional defense network.

The ability of the GCC states to achieve this goal is not a foregone conclusion, given the internal divisions and rivalries that conspire against the kind of unified planning the Administration has been encouraging. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (generally supported by Kuwait), tend to be the most concerned about Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian intentions, while Qatar and Oman tend to adopt more accommodationist views, and are less eager to accept Saudi dominance. Washington must be cognizant of these tensions and acknowledge that they are genuine and deep-rooted. On the other hand, we should not accept these differences as an excuse for the GCC states failing to take meaningful steps towards a coherent, regional defense posture.

Which brings me back to our own differences with our Gulf partners, and the concerns that our regional policies have generated. In addition to the issues I mentioned earlier, Gulf states are paying close attention to our self-proclaimed interest in a "pivot" to Asia, to the prospect that America is poised to become the world's top energy producer, and to the effects of sequestration and defense-budget cuts on deployments, fearing that each of these will weaken the traditional base of our ties to the Gulf. For the purpose of this statement, I will limit my consideration to what I believe to be the two principal issues in play: the nuclear negotiations with Iran and our policy toward the civil war in Syria.

In the first instance, the ongoing P5+1 negotiations designed to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon have prompted Gulf states' fears that, at the end of the day, Tehran will be permitted to maintain some enrichment capacity, even as it pursues its destabilizing activities in the region. A couple of points on this: first, if a deal can be struck - and it is a big if - the outcome will do much more to impede Tehran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon than the other alternative course of action -- limited military strikes-- with much less potential for negative consequences. On the question of Iranian destabilizing behavior in the region, we have consciously kept "regional issues" off the table in order to maintain focus on how we can stop Iran's militarized nuclear program. But as Secretary Hagel said in Jeddah last week, and I believe this is true, the P5+1 negotiations "will under no circumstances trade away regional security for concessions on Iran's nuclear program." Someone has suggested that, should the nuclear talks succeed, a second, expanded round should be convened immediately on the subject of Iran's relations with its neighbors, bringing the GCC to the table with the P5+1.

Syria is a more difficult issue, a humanitarian nightmare, an affront to our collective conscience, and increasingly, home to a metastasizing violent-extremist movement that will almost certainly threaten US friends and interests in the region and, quite likely, well beyond. Gulf states are unhappy because President Obama has declined to join them in supporting the armed opposition with lethal assistance, and for failing to enforce his own red line last summer when evidence of chemical weapons use by the Assad regime became clear. Personally, I think we can and should do more to influence the outcome of this struggle, but we should do so in support of our own interests, not to mollify our Gulf allies. Frankly, for them, eliminating the Assad regime is the quickest way to sever the so-called Shia crescent that they see arcing across the Levant, from Hizballah in Lebanon to the Presidential Palace in Baghdad. While we certainly have an interest in seeing Hizballah's wings clipped, we equally want to avoid becoming party to a campaign that has as much to do with sectarian dominance as it does good governance.

Madame Chairman, Ranking Member Deutsch, Distinguished Members, my bottom line is this: for all their public displays of unhappiness with the United States, our Gulf partners know well that no other nation can or will ensure their security as we have done for the past 70 years. Similarly, our strategic interests in the Gulf will endure, and with them, our continued investment in the region's stability. This is the assurance conveyed by every senior Administration official who has engaged with our Gulf allies in recent months, and I believe it to be a genuine expression of American commitment.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to your questions.