

# U.S.-GCC Relations: Closing the Credibility Gap

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished subcommittee members, thank you for inviting me to testify on the state of U.S.-GCC relations. It is an honor for me to be here.

The high-level summit in Camp David last May with leaders of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states -- Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates -- focused on assuring them that the U.S. remains committed to their security, while winning their support for the nuclear deal being negotiated with Iran.

A Joint Statement released at the summit described the outlines of “a new U.S.-GCC strategic partnership” and highlighted a number of areas where the United States and the GCC committed to enhanced cooperation:

- **Security Assurances:** the U.S. stated its readiness “to work jointly with the GCC states to deter and confront an external threat to any GCC state’s territorial integrity that is inconsistent with the UN Charter” to include “the potential use of military force.”
- **Missile Defense:** the GCC states committed to “the development of a GCC-wide Ballistic Missile Early Warning System” as well as improved missile defense cooperation;
- **Military Training and Exercises:** the parties agreed to “a new, recurring, large-scale exercise emphasizing interoperability against asymmetric threats, such as terrorist or cyber-attacks” and more frequent counter-terrorism cooperation and training involving Special Operations Forces.
- **Arms Transfers:** the United States agreed to fast-track arms transfers to GCC states;
- **Maritime Security:** the GCC states agreed to increase their participation in international maritime task forces on counter-terrorism and counter-piracy and to further steps to share information about illicit arms transfers, while the U.S. agreed to additional training and assistance for coastal security, protection of offshore infrastructure, and counter-smuggling;
- **Counter-terrorism:** the parties agreed to initiatives to further build their capacity to track, investigate, and prosecute those engaged in terrorist activities within their borders, to deter transit, financing and recruitment by violent extremists, to identify and share information about suspected foreign terrorist fighters, and to cut off terrorist financing.
- **Critical Infrastructure and Cybersecurity:** the parties agreed to consult on cybersecurity initiatives, share expertise and best practices, and the U.S. agreed to provide additional assistance in this area, including workshops, exercises, and information sharing.
- **Regional Security:** the parties also committed to cooperate in finding peaceful solutions to the region’s conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, to a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to counter Iran’s destabilizing activities.

The statement also contained an endorsement by the GCC of the Administration's efforts to negotiate a "comprehensive, verifiable deal that fully addresses the regional and international concerns about Iran's nuclear program" and reaffirms the parties' willingness "to develop normalized relations with Iran should it cease its destabilizing activities" and "their belief that such relations would contribute to regional security."

While many of these announced measures would mark a step forward in U.S.-GCC relations, much will depend on follow-through in the months and years to come—particularly with regard to countering Iran's destabilizing activities. This is the central concern of Gulf leaders, who are already deeply concerned about Iran's growing regional influence, and who worry that in the event of a long-term nuclear accord between the P5+1 and Iran, the latter would use funds obtained through sanctions relief and its status as a nuclear threshold state to further advance its regional agenda. Absent action on this front, many of the announced steps are unlikely to have a significant impact on the broader fabric of U.S.-GCC relations, and on Washington's ability to influence the policies of particular GCC allies that it finds problematic.

The roots of the growing distrust between the two sides can be traced to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the perception in much of the region that the United States had, through incompetence or design, turned over Iraq (which had been traditionally ruled by a largely Sunni Arab clique) to "the Shiites" and Iran. This was reinforced by the widespread perception in the GCC and among other regional allies, that when it entered office, the Obama Administration too eagerly courted traditional enemies such as the Islamic Republic of Iran at the expense of its traditional allies, and too quickly abandoned traditional allies such as Hosni Mubarak in 2011 during the initial phases of what was then called the Arab Spring. (Though, to be fair, there was really not all that much that the U.S. could do differently in the latter case.) This destructive dynamic was further strengthened by the Obama Administration's tendency to frame and implement measures to assure the GCC states in ways that tended to exacerbate, rather than allay their fears. This is best illustrated by the following examples:

**Arms Transfers and Capacity Building -- Against Which Threat?** In recent years, the United States has sold tens of billions of dollars in arms to its Gulf Arab allies (including missile defenses, attack helicopters, and strike aircraft). The intent has been to assure them by enhancing their ability to deter and counter external aggression, while convincing Tehran that its nuclear program will harm, rather than enhance, its security.

Yet Tehran is unlikely to engage in the kind of conventional aggression that would provide its neighbors (and the United States) with reason to respond by conventional means. It is much more likely to engage in subversion and proxy warfare, as it has done in the past and continues to do today. For example, the GCC states emphasize Tehran's role in the slaughter of Sunni Arab civilians in Iraq and Syria, and in stoking sectarian violence in the region, which (combined with past U.S. inaction) has enabled groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to present themselves as stalwart defenders of the Sunnis.

By contrast, President Obama emphasized the following in an April 5 interview with Thomas Friedman: "The biggest threats that [our Sunni Arab allies] face may not be coming from Iran invading. It's going to be from dissatisfaction inside their own countries." Moreover, in light of the administration's announced "rebalance to Asia" and the president's statement in the Friedman interview that "the U.S.'s core interests in the region are not oil," GCC leaders may view large U.S. arms sales less as a tangible expression of enduring commitment than a sign that America is providing its friends with the means to fend for themselves as it prepares to leave the region.

**Augmented U.S. Forward Presence -- To What End?** While the United States has drawn down its presence in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years, it has increased other aspects of its presence around the Gulf as part of efforts to assure allies and deter Iran. For instance, it has been building up its missile defenses in the region since 2006, with more than two battalions of Patriot PAC-2/3 missiles deployed in four countries, two to three Aegis ships in the Persian Gulf, and AN/TPY-2 X-band radars in Israel, Turkey, and Qatar. The U.S. Navy also keeps at least one aircraft carrier in the area, and the deployment of F-22 stealth fighters there has become routine. At the same time, American naval forces have worked to enhance their ability to deal with Iran's anti-access/area-denial capabilities.

Yet there is no sign that the large post-1991 U.S. military presence in the Gulf has deterred Iran from using proxies to target U.S. interests in the region or elsewhere. During this period, Tehran caused the death of nineteen U.S. airmen in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, provided arms to Shiite "special groups" that killed hundreds of U.S. service members in Iraq, and plotted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington in 2011. Nor has it deterred Iran from intervening in regional conflicts in ways that have exacerbated sectarian tensions, threatened the security of U.S. allies, and increased its influence in the region. In short, while the U.S. presence ensures freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf, it has not deterred Iran from pursuing a strategy of proxy warfare that poses a major challenge to regional stability.

GCC allies are frequently reminded that America continues to maintain some 35,000 service members in the region, but this has led them to question the purpose of such a large forward presence -- especially at a time when Iran and Hezbollah's intervention has contributed to the death of more than 200,000 Syrians, mostly Sunni civilians, amid U.S. inaction. And even when Washington finally did act against ISIS, it did so at least initially on behalf of beleaguered Iraqi minorities (Yazidis in Sinjar, Turkmens at Amerli, and Kurds in Erbil) rather than Sunni Arabs.

**Faded Redlines?** Over the years, Washington has attempted to define "acceptable" limits for, and drawn redlines of varying intensity regarding Iran's nuclear program. Thus, in January 2012, President Obama declared that if Tehran tried to build a nuclear weapon, the United States would use all means at its disposal to prevent it from doing so. This redline came, however, after Tehran had thwarted all prior attempts to impose limits on its program in order to become a nuclear threshold state. It also followed the president's August 2012 redline concerning chemical weapons use in Syria, which he subsequently failed to enforce when the Assad regime crossed it a year later.

Since his January 2012 warning to Iran, the president has tended to couch his threats in passive language that conveys more ambivalence than resolve, to allies and adversaries alike. In a March 2012 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, he stated, "I also don't, as a matter of sound policy, go around advertising exactly what our intentions are. But...when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have nuclear weapons, we mean what we say." He struck a similar tone in his April interview with Friedman, stating that if Iran does not change as a result of U.S. efforts to engage it, "our deterrence capabilities, our military superiority stays in place. We're not relinquishing our capacity to defend ourselves or our allies. In that situation, why wouldn't we test it?"

Thus, the U.S. redline gave Tehran the latitude it needed to become a nuclear threshold state. While this may not be an existential concern to the United States given its vast military superiority, from the point of view of America's regional partners it is a game-changing development that has significantly altered Middle Eastern power dynamics. And rather than stem nuclear proliferation in the region, the U.S. redline is likely to inadvertently spur proliferation, with Saudi Arabia vowing to match whatever nuclear infrastructure Iran is permitted to keep as part of a long-term accord with the P5+1.

**Security Guarantees.** Prior to the Camp David summit, the Obama administration had been looking for ways to formalize the U.S. commitment to its Gulf partners. The president emphasized this point in the Friedman interview: "When it comes to external aggression, I think we're going to be there for our [Arab] friends -- and I want to see how we can formalize that a little bit more than we currently have."

Prior to the summit, some Gulf states were expected to seek security guarantees along the lines of Article V of the 1949 Washington Treaty, the legal basis for the collective security arrangements that underpin the NATO alliance. Article V states that "an armed attack against one or more [parties to the treaty] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all," and that "each of them" will take "such actions as it deems necessary...to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." It should be noted that the article only covers attacks in Europe and North America, and gives each member significant latitude in choosing how to respond. Congress, however, would almost certainly not have approved a treaty that could draw the United States further into the region's numerous conflicts.

Instead, what the GCC states got was a somewhat tepid commitment to "work jointly...to deter and confront an external threat to any GCC state's territorial integrity that is inconsistent with the UN Charter." However, Tehran's reliance on subversion and proxy warfare (and, more recently, offensive cyber operations) would likely complicate efforts to respond to a perceived act of Iranian aggression -- as would the tendency of some U.S. Gulf allies to see Iranian hands behind almost every event in the region.

**Conclusion.** The United States currently has a credibility deficit that threatens its interests and endangers its allies. The steps it has taken in the past to assure GCC allies -- arms transfers, forward presence, and redlines -- have often failed to allay their doubts, and frequently compounded their fears. In this light, the additional steps promised at the Camp David summit do not constitute a game-changer in U.S.-GCC relations, especially since the Joint Statement is so vague regarding specific steps to counter Iran's destabilizing activities.

Only by pushing back against Iran's efforts to expand its regional influence can Washington hope to restore its credibility. To this end, the United States should:

1. Ramp up support for the "moderate" opposition in Syria.
2. More proactively work to deter and interdict Iran's arms shipments to allies and proxies in the region.
3. Strengthen support for partners engaged in conflicts with Tehran's allies and proxies.
4. Supplement routine defensive military exercises with exercises rehearsing long-range offensive strike operations in the Gulf.
5. Tend to and sharpen redlines regarding Iran's nuclear program to more clearly spell out the price Tehran would pay if it were to attempt a breakout.

There is no reason that such a policy cannot go hand-in-hand with engaging Iran, just as the United States pushed back against Soviet aggression while engaging Moscow during the Cold War. For as much as it may be in the American interest to conclude a long-term nuclear accord with Tehran, it is also a U.S. interest to curb Iranian activities that fuel sectarian violence, contribute to the appeal of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and ultimately threaten the stability and security of U.S. allies in the region. Such a policy would also go a long way toward repairing ties with traditional allies in a part of the world that still matters very much to U.S. security.