

The Persian Gulf Dilemma: United in the West, Divided in the Gulf

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Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf

By Steve A. Yetiv *and* Katerina Oskarsson

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018, 238 pages, \$29.95, ISBN: 1503604179

The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities – Opportunities and Perils

Edited by Dania Koleilat Khatib *and* Marwa Maziad

New York: Routledge, 2018, 332 pages, \$36.40, ISBN: 113858536X

Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis

By Andreas Krieg

Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 281 pages, \$95.85, ISBN: 9811363137

Energy Kingdoms: Oil and Political Survival in the Persian Gulf

Edited by Jim Krane

New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 215 pages, \$26.00, ISBN: 0231179308

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Since the beginning of the 20th century, Western influence in the Persian Gulf has continued to expand; this process has also exposed several challenges from rivals of the United States. However, this increasing influence was not extensive only in one part of this political landscape, as middle powers from the Persian Gulf pursued lobbies in U.S. politics. Moreover, the development of distinctive bilateral ties between the Persian Gulf States and their western patron culminated in varying degrees of dependence on and coherence with the U.S. grand strategy. The pace of economic development for the oil-rich Gulf States has highlighted divergences in terms of regional politics, as Saudi Arabia's economic leap provided a platform to claim regional leadership. Contradictions in political preferences such as attitudes toward political Islam, political freedom, etc. paved the way for continuously conflictual bilateral affairs. Turkish involvement in Persian Gulf politics also created a rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which has caused several issues in the last decade.

One should grasp how the United States has been historically embedded in the political history of the Persian Gulf with particular consideration as to when and how hegemonic challenges became observable in this region. Steve A. Yetiv and Katerina Oskarsson's *Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf* presents a comprehensive historical overview of U.S. involvement in the political sphere

of the Gulf. This study utilizes data ranging over 30 years regarding oil exports and the arms trade between U.S.-China-Russia and the Persian Gulf States. Yetiv and Oskarsson endeavor to create an accurate measurement of U.S. hegemony and its challenges by focusing on the following three parameters: (i) the state of diplomatic relations between external major powers and regional states; (ii) military presence, security arrangements and arms sales to the region; and (iii) economic and energy ties between regional states and external major powers (p. 8). They claim that these three super-categories, each with multiple parameters, have a better potential than other approaches for measuring the impact of U.S. hegemony and its challenges in the Persian Gulf.

Chapter 2 addresses U.S. supremacy in the oil market in the 20th century, which led to the world oil dominance of the Seven Sisters until the Arab states started to nationalize their oil assets during the 1970s (p. 15). Expanding U.S. influence on the economic affairs of the Persian Gulf States also concretized Western impact on the political sphere. The third chapter emphasizes the fact that the more the U.S. intruded into the Persian Gulf oil market, the more it became entangled with inter-state competition in the region (p. 33). The chapter presents this idea through examples of the 1973 oil crisis, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq invasion. It is quite important to grasp the insight presented by the authors,

which implies that the economic and energy ties created a security dimension between the Persian Gulf States and the U.S. (pp. 43–5). Moreover, Saudi Arabia's transformation in the 2000s into the leading oil producer in the world and its distinct security ties with the United States is also a cornerstone for better understanding the current status of the Persian Gulf security structure. Although the United States developed security and energy ties with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members such as Qatar and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia always stood as a pillar of U.S. interests in the region (p. 47). The authors then illustrate how U.S. economic interests have grown exponentially since the beginning of the 21st century. The 350 percent increase in the total trade between the U.S. and the Persian Gulf States between 2000 and 2014 is a clear indicator of the economic embeddedness of these actors (p. 58). However, these functional ties are challenged by a doubling share of Saudi imports by China, which means that the Persian Gulf export markets have gradually become more diversified.

Booming Chinese demand since the 1990s positioned this state as the second-largest importer of foreign oil in 2009 and the biggest importer in 2013. In the year after that the Persian Gulf States, namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Oman accounted for more than 70 percent of China's imports from the Middle East (p. 73). Although establishing diplomatic ties after the 1970s starting with Kuwait, the Persian Gulf States possess

strong economic and political ties with China that are comparable to the ties with the United States (pp. 74–5). However, in the security dimension, China lacks adequate military influence and operational capability in the Persian Gulf (p. 80). The Chinese lack of military influence is further nullified by Russian involvement with the security dimension of the Persian Gulf. Existent arms trade amongst Russia, Iran and Iraq with regard to the roaring demand for Russian arms from Saudi Arabia and Qatar indicates that there are challenges to U.S. dominance in terms of security provision. Nonetheless, the third part of the authors' work uses statistical proof to highlight the pre-eminent dominance of the U.S. in all of these dimensions.

All of the challenges encountered in the security, economy and energy dimensions of bilateral affairs are reflected in the Gulf States' increased external influence in U.S. domestic politics. Dania Koleat and Marwa Maziad's *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities – Opportunities and Perils* illustrates in detail how U.S. dominance in the Gulf finds echoes in domestic politics. As almost all of the scholarly work on image politics resorts to the 9/11 attack; the authors of this book also base their arguments on the turbulence in U.S.-Saudi affairs after the incident (p. 17). The authors emphasize the Saudi failure in lobbying over terrorism charges by the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) after the 9/11 attacks. The penultimate assertion of the book is

that U.S.-Saudi relations perhaps experienced their biggest blow due to that incident and lobbying alone cannot repair bilateral relations without support from other areas (p. 25). The third biggest trauma in U.S.-Gulf affairs, including the 1973 oil crisis, was the Arab Uprisings. However, the incident that expedited the Gulf lobbying in the U.S. was the 2017 Gulf crisis between Qatar and the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates duo. The U.S. response to the Qatari crisis was confusing for the region, just as it was for the Arab revolts. U.S. President Donald J. Trump sided with the Saudi-UAE duo while his secretary of state Rex Tillerson chose a more temperate stance against Qatar and called for a reduction on the blockade (pp. 37–38). The authors highlight the strategic transformation in U.S. grand strategy as the Trump doctrine evolved from the “America First” initiative into an “America Only” statement (p. 50). The new grand strategy implemented by the U.S. President has increased the cost of lobbying and decreased the chance of success when there is a conflict of interests.

Although the Persian Gulf States are united regarding their designated patron in the West, they have conflicting lobbying activities in this sphere. The main three actors that compete to embellish their images in U.S. politics are Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are thoroughly analyzed in the third section of the book. The financial expansion toward Europe and the United States undertaken by Qatar and the UAE is indicated as an

act of “virtual enlargement” or “nation branding” (p. 157). This can be elaborated on as an endeavor of acquaintance by these two Persian Gulf States as equals in the perceptions of Western countries. The nation branding strategy is implemented through foreign direct investments and cooperative institutional projects mostly pursued by Qatar and the UAE (pp. 174–7). Saudi Arabia abated the ideological threat posed by countries such as Tunisia, Syria, Yemen and Libya through an increased engagement in regional and international politics. The main idea behind this attempt was to improve the ‘image projection’ of Saudi Arabia to evade the dangers that had developed after the Arab Spring (p. 183). The main reasoning used to explain the Saudi efforts toward image projection is the encirclement syndrome. The divergence in lobbying and nation branding activities by Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, is due to the fact that only the latter faces serious jeopardy in terms of regime security. This threat forced the Saudi state to claim a leader-type role in the Middle East as a guarantor of Persian Gulf affairs and present itself as an Islamic model in the international arena (p. 188). Naturally, this has led to a faithful partner role for Saudi Arabia in relation to the West, and competition with the other Persian Gulf actors to preserve its leadership role.

The political and economic affairs between the West and the Persian Gulf States have forced each state into a certain role; these roles were challenged by other actors as the region

succumbed to conflict and divergence. *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis* edited by Anreas Krieg illustrates the crux of the Persian Gulf dilemma. Krieg's work elaborates on the Gulf Crisis with specific consideration to three components: defense structure, political economy and public diplomacy. The first section of the book highlights the divergences between threat perceptions in the Persian Gulf. The argument regarding the differences in threat perceptions is that the Arab Spring completely disbanded the consensus that had developed since the Persian Gulf War (p. 26). As the author details, the bifurcation occurred after the Muslim Brotherhood's victory in Egypt; Krieg offers an interesting take on tribalism in Persian Gulf affairs in the following section. This chapter provides insight into tribalism in the Persian Gulf as a 'Trojan horse' that might cause a deep shock for the region (p. 44). Krieg offers a comprehensive argument regarding the Persian Gulf crisis which asserts that the crux of the problem is the Qatar-UAE feud. The author illustrates that bilateral affairs between Qatar and the UAE became abysmal after the 2017 crisis as these states have engaged in an information war with each other (p. 102).

The Saudi articulation of the Qatar-UAE dispute, along with the swift change in U.S. foreign policy under Donald J. Trump since 2016, gave rise to the 2017 Gulf crisis. It is quite apparent that U.S. foreign policy under the Obama presidency implemented a moderate strategy toward the 2014 Gulf crisis; the U.S. strategy toward

the 2017 Gulf crisis under the Trump presidency was more tendentious (p. 134). Additionally, the political economy of the Gulf crisis is one of the biggest concerns of the United States since each Persian Gulf state is an important economic partner. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain initiated the 2017 Ramadan Blockade it was quite obvious that this was an attempt to damage the Qatari economy for political gain (p. 147). This incident should be designated as an undesirable development, since it is rational for the U.S. to act as a bystander in a quagmire amongst its major economic partners in the region. These types of conflicting developments diminished the inclusive capacity of the Gulf Cooperation Council as the three members, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain will pose a certain impediment to Qatari development. Hence, the lack of unity in the GCC might hinder the regional influence of Western allies.

The most important aspect of the 2017 Gulf crisis is the fact that Qatar chose a significantly resilient style by diversifying its political co-dependence with non-Arab states such as Turkey and Iran. The AK Party government has exponentially increased the economic flow between Turkey and the GCC, increasing political co-dependence gradually. The Turkey-Qatar duo became the rising stars of the region as bilateral affairs improved at an unprecedented pace (p. 201). Turkey's rapprochement with Qatar after the Anti-Terror Quartet's (ATQ) demands regarding the Turkish military base in Qatar distanced

the GCC states. In the case of Iran-Qatar bilateral affairs, the latter actor faced an immense securitization by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (p. 222). The Iran-Qatar rapprochement was almost completely caused by their mutual dependence on energy since they share the same natural gas resources in the South Pars field.

Understanding the energy dimension of the 2014 and 2017 Gulf crises requires a comprehensive approach; Jim Krane presents such an approach in his book, *Energy Kingdoms, Oil and Political Survival in the Gulf*. Any kind of turbulence in the energy sector and the nominal value of oil-based products pose a serious threat to the Gulf economies. Although most of the Persian Gulf States have nationalized their resources, they have maintained an unusually high rate of subsidies (p. 99). These levels of subsidies keep the Gulf states' economies quite vulnerable, as even insubstantial shocks in oil prices have the potential to damage their economies (p. 106). The United Arab Emirates is the most active actor in the region in terms of reducing the economic burden of subsidies. However, Saudi Arabia, whose population has quadrupled since the 1970s, had maintained a high level of subsidies, in energy in particular (p. 117). This trend ended with Salman b. Abdulaziz's accession to the throne in 2017 and Mohammed bin Salman's increase in ranks to become the crown prince. Oil and energy prices have been increasing in a rapid manner ever since (p. 125). Inflation in Saudi Arabia is not confined to oil-based products; the cost

of water and electricity has also increased substantially. The other Persian Gulf States have a varying level of hardship regarding energy costs; Oman is in the tightest and Qatar is in the wealthiest spot (p. 143).

The Persian Gulf has experienced remarkable changes since the 1970s that have tended to be on the divisive side. The Gulf states have been improving their economic performances at a substantial pace. This economic expansion has paved the way for investments in Europe and the United States. This process has culminated in a competition between the Persian Gulf States in the West in terms of image politics. The increased number of investments in Western states by the GCC states has also forced these major powers into political competition in the region. Rapid increases in the GDPs of the Persian Gulf States have resulted in increased influence in the region that subsequently overlapped and turned into conflicts. The security dimension of the Persian Gulf dilemma has mostly revolved around the Muslim Brotherhood organization in the Middle East. Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain securitized the organization while Qatar and Turkey facilitated their activities. This process ended with a political feud between Qatar and the above-mentioned four states, which surfaced as the 2014 and 2017 Gulf crises.

Another source of turbulence in the Persian Gulf is the energy dimension. Industrial development in the region created a higher demand for energy.

Some of the Persian Gulf States even imported energy during the 2008–9 economic crisis and gradually implemented subsidy reforms. Most of the GCC states feared public protests as they increased the individual costs for energy such as hydro-electric power, electricity, oil and natural gas. The increasing population and energy demand on the one hand and the regional conflicts on the other

have forced the GCC states into a stalemate. Although several scholars have argued that the Qatar-UAE rift has become too wide, impeding a terminal enclosure, there is always an alternative way in the art of politics. What might be rational for the Gulf States is to unify the Persian Gulf against threats within great proximity rather than to compete for a better image on another continent. ■