



Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi, and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Saudi Arabia, preside over the 'Sheikh Zayed Heritage Festival 2016' in Abu Dhabi, UAE, on 4 December 2016.

GCC Policies Toward the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and Yemen: Ally-Adversary Dilemmas

by *Fred H. Lawson*

Studies of the foreign policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries usually ignore important initiatives that have been undertaken with regard to the Bab al-Mandab region, an area encompassing the southern end of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and Yemen. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have become actively involved in this pivotal geopolitical space over the past decade, and their relations with one another exhibit a marked shift from mutual complementarity to reciprocal friction. Escalating rivalry and mistrust among these three governments can usefully be explained by what Glenn Snyder calls “the alliance security dilemma.”¹

Shift to sustained intervention

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have been drawn into Bab al-Mandab by three overlapping developments. First, the rise in world food prices that began in the 2000s incentivized GCC states to ramp up investment in agricultural land—Riyadh, Doha and Abu Dhabi all turned to Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda as prospective breadbaskets.² Doha pushed matters furthest by proposing to construct a massive canal in central Sudan that would have siphoned off more than one percent of the Nile River’s total annual downstream flow to create additional farmland. This project elicited fierce opposition not only from Cairo,

but also Riyadh, and it contributed to the sudden crisis in Saudi-Qatari relations that erupted in March 2014.³

Second, these three states were drawn into the region to challenge Iran, which had forged close ties with Sudan during the late 1980s and with Eritrea and Djibouti after 2007.⁴ Beginning in late 2008, Iranian warships routinely called at the Eritrean port of Assab as part of the multinational campaign against Somalia-based pirates. Saudi officials charged that the Iranians took advantage of these stopovers to deliver arms and military materiel to be forwarded to the militant Ansar Allah (“Supporters of God”) movement in northern Yemen, commonly known as the Houthis. In November 2009, when Saudi Arabia deployed patrol boats along the Yemeni coast to block such shipments, Iranian commanders announced their intention to station a destroyer at the southern end of the Red Sea.⁵ Soon after, then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad traveled to Djibouti and concluded a half-dozen bilateral economic agreements.⁶

Notable divergences in the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE toward the Bab al-Mandab region reflect the dilemmas of alliance management when challenging a common adversary.

Qatar riposted against these Iranian advances by stepping in to broker a provisional agreement between Khartoum and the secessionists in Darfur.⁷ Doha subsequently mediated a ceasefire between Eritrea and Djibouti regarding contested territory, and, in June 2010, sent 200 troops to the Eritrea-Djibouti border to monitor the settlement.⁸ In early 2014, Riyadh’s counteroffensive against Tehran picked up momentum and Saudi officials abruptly suspended all of the kingdom’s financial transactions involving Sudan. The resultant economic shock prompted the government in Khartoum to shut down the main Iranian cultural center in the country.⁹ Contingents of the Saudi and UAE armed forces then took up positions in Djibouti. Following a violent altercation between UAE representatives and Djiboutian military officers in April 2015, the UAE expeditionary force relocated to Assab, pushing aside the Iranian navy and transforming the sleepy harbor into a combined deep-water port and tactical air base.¹⁰ UAE commanders also set up a training facility for the Somali armed forces and engaged in negotiations with the autonomous administration of Somaliland to obtain access to the Berbera port.¹¹

Third, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE found themselves entangled in Bab al-Mandab as a result of the Yemen civil war. Successive attempts by Doha to broker an accord between Houthi fighters and President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi foundered,¹² which persuaded Riyadh to adopt increasingly belligerent policies in an effort to restore order.¹³ Qatar nevertheless retained a substantial degree of influence in Yemeni politics, largely due to its connections with the Islamist Reform (al-Islah) group—a linkage that irritated both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and played a role in precipitating the March 2014 GCC diplomatic crisis.¹⁴

Some semblance of unity among the three GCC states characterized the start of the Saudi-led military offensive against the Houthis, which got underway in late March 2015.¹⁵ Warplanes from the Saudi, Qatari and Emirati air forces took part in the initial bombing raids, and warships from their navies patrolled the waters of Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. One-thousand Qatari troops backed by 200 armored vehicles deployed along Saudi Arabia’s southern border in April and May,¹⁶ and elite units of the UAE armed forces took the lead in pushing Houthi fighters out of Aden during June and July.¹⁷ Pro-government forces in the south were reinforced that August by the arrival of a UAE mechanized infantry brigade along with a battalion of Leclerc tanks.

Trilateral unity began to crumble during the winter of 2015-16. Qatar and the UAE had a falling out over al-Islah, with the UAE foreign minister blaming that movement’s reluctance to break completely with the Houthis because the latter retained control of the strategic city of Taiz.¹⁸ The success of the UAE’s ground

II. Analysis

offensives tempted it to consider establishing a long-term presence in Aden and the extensive oil-producing lands of Hadramawt and Shabwah.¹⁹ UAE representatives conferred regularly with leaders of the separatist Southern Movement, and allowed checkpoints throughout Aden, ad-Dali' and Lahij to display the old South Yemen flag.²⁰ Prospects for the emergence of an autonomous southern zone improved markedly after UAE forces gained control of the port city of al-Mukalla in April 2016 and announced that they would no longer conduct offensive operations.²¹ Since then, UAE companies have invested substantial funds to improve infrastructure on Socotra Island to the east of al-Mukalla.²²

President Hadi responded to Abu Dhabi's evident drift toward sponsoring southern autonomy by dismissing Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, who enjoyed close ties to the UAE, and refusing to renew Dubai-based DP World's contract to manage Aden harbor. Emirati commanders retaliated by blocking President Hadi's aircraft from landing at Aden, and Emirati diplomats treated him with disdain when he visited Abu Dhabi in April 2017 to try to patch things up.²³ On the other hand, Saudi officials joined the Yemeni government in expressing deep misgivings when the UAE helped convene a General Congress of Hadramawt at the end of April.²⁴ The meeting's concluding document called for the establishment of an "independent province" in eastern Yemen, which provoked President Hadi to dismiss the governor of Aden and four ministers of state who had openly aligned themselves with the UAE.²⁵ As the fissure dividing Riyadh from Abu Dhabi kept widening, Doha and its al-Islah allies acquired greater leverage in both internal and regional affairs.²⁶

Understanding rifts within the GCC

Notable divergences in the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE toward the Bab al-Mandab region reflect the dilemmas of alliance management when challenging a common adversary. Any state that faces a threatening or belligerent adversary can be expected to strengthen ties to its primary strategic partner, thereby diminishing the likelihood that the ally will abandon it.²⁷ However, by augmenting its commitment to the alliance, the state ends up reducing its influence over its partner, and encourages the ally to carry out bold or provocative actions that may well entrap it in conflicts that it would prefer to avoid.²⁸ In this way, Saudi Arabia's increased commitment to the GCC alliance has enabled Qatar and the UAE to undertake diplomatic and military initiatives that effectively undermine (and at times run counter to) Saudi security interests.

Ally-adversary interactions become even harder to manage when two or more allies are involved. The presence of two strategic partners increases the chances that a state will get dragged into an unwanted conflict. Equally important, efforts to strengthen ties to one ally bring into question one's commitment to the other, thereby giving the second partner an incentive to abandon the alliance. Which ally a state chooses to conciliate depends on how dependent it is on each one. In general, a highly-dependant state is more likely to be entrapped by its less dependant ally.²⁹

In the case of recent GCC relations, Riyadh finds itself heavily reliant on Abu Dhabi. The deepening rifts that Saudi Arabia had with both Qatar and the UAE put the kingdom at a growing disadvantage in its dealings with Tehran—and have forced Saudi policymakers to mollify one partner or the other. Unsurprisingly, Riyadh chose to rally alongside Abu Dhabi and demand in June 2017 that Doha sever its connections with the region's diverse Muslim Brotherhood organizations.³⁰ The recent replay of the March 2014 intra-GCC crisis lays the foundation for a possible reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemeni arena, much to the detriment of Saudi-Qatari relations.

Fred H. Lawson is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews.

- ¹ Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461-495. See also: Tongfi Kim, "Why Alliances Entangle But Seldom Entrap States," *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 350-377.
- ² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 143-150.
- ³ Martin Keulertz, "Inward Investment in Sudan: The Case of Qatar," in *Land and Hydropolitics in the Nile River Basin*, ed. Anders Jaegerskog and Terje Oestigaard (London: Routledge, 2016), 73-88.
- ⁴ Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Middle East Conflicts and Middle Level Power Intervention in the Horn of Africa," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (1996): 387-404.
 Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Iran in the Horn of Africa: Outflanking U.S. Allies," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 117-133.
 Aliou Manjang, "Beyond the Middle East: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Horn of Africa," *International Relations and Diplomacy* 5, no. 1 (2017): 46-60.
- ⁵ Lefebvre, "Iran in the Horn of Africa," 129.
- ⁶ Manjang, "Beyond the Middle East," 52.
- ⁷ Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011): 545.
- ⁸ Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton, "Why Did Qatar Leave the Djibouti-Eritrea Border?" *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/06/qatar-army-djibouti-eritrea-border-170618100118290.html>.
 Mohamed Husein Gaas, "Qatari Involvement in the Horn of Africa: A King Maker and a Successful Mediator?" in *Religion, Prestige and Windows of Opportunity?*, ed. Stig Jarle Hansen (Aas: Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2013), 58-59.
- ⁹ "Iran, Saudi Arabia Jostle for Influence in Sudan as Iranian Cultural Centre Shut Down," *Middle East Eye*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-saudi-arabia-jostle-influence-sudan-iranian-cultural-centre-shut-down-61716582>.
- ¹⁰ Alex Mello and Michael Knights, "West of Suez for the United Arab Emirates," *War on the Rocks*, September 1, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/>.
 Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy" (Issue Paper No. 4, Washington, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2017), 33-34, http://www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/UAE-Security_ONLINE.pdf.
- ¹¹ "UAE-Funded Somali Military Centre Opens," *The National* (Abu Dhabi), May 13, 2015, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/uae-funded-somali-military-centre-opens-1.135075>.
 Ibish, "UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy," 34.
- ¹² Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," 549-555.
 Stig Jarle Hansen, "The Start of Qatar as a Foreign Policy Actor: Qatar's Engagement in Yemen," in *Religion, Prestige and Windows of Opportunity?*, ed. Hansen, 19-31.
- ¹³ Stig Stenslie, "Not too Strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen" (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, Oslo, 2013), 1-3.
 Nawaf Obaid, "Saudi Arabia Shifts to More Activist Foreign Policy Doctrine," *Al-Monitor*, October 17, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2013/10/saudi-shifts-foreign-policy-doctrine.html>.
- ¹⁴ Farea al-Muslimi, "Qatar Encroaches on Saudi Influence in Yemen," *Al-Monitor*, August 20, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/qatar-encroaches-saudi-influence-yemen.html>.
 Farea al-Muslimi, "Yemen Latest Front Line in Saudi-Qatari Feud," *Al-Monitor*, April 23, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2014/04/yemen-frontline-saudi-qatar-feud.html>.
- ¹⁵ Peter Salisbury, "Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State," (London: Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, 2016), 1-42. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-05-25-yemen-stemming-rise-of-chaos-state-salisbury.pdf>.
 Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, "The War in Yemen," *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016): 157-186.
- ¹⁶ "Qatar Deploys 1,000 Ground Troops to Fight in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, September 7, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/qatar-deploys-1000-ground-troops-fight-yemen-150907043020594.html>.
- ¹⁷ Jeremy Binnie, "Emirati Armoured Brigade Spearheads Aden Breakout," *Jane's 360*, IHS, August 7, 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/53503/analysis-emirati-armoured-brigade-spearheads-aden-breakout>.
 Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden" (Policy Watch 2464,

II. Analysis

- Washington, DC, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-saudi-uae-war-effort-in-yemen-part-1-operation-golden-arrow-in-aden>.
- ¹⁸ Ashraf al-Falahi, "Islah's Houthi Gamble," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/58887>.
- Sultan Barakat, "Could the Saudi-Led Coalition in Yemen be Fracturing?" Markaz, Brookings Institution, December 29, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/12/29/could-the-saudi-led-coalition-in-yemen-be-fracturing/>.
- "Yemen: Is Peace Possible?" (Middle East Report No. 167, Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2016), 23, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/167-yemen-is-peace-possible.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ Kristin Smith Diwan and Fatima Abo Alasrar, "Gulf States Struggle to Achieve Goals in Yemen's War," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 10, 2016, <http://www.agsiw.org/gulf-states-struggle-to-achieve-goals-in-yemens-war/>.
- ²⁰ Muhammad Sayyid Rasas, "The UAE as a Rising Regional Force," Al-Akhbar, June 1, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63941>.
- ²¹ Mohammed Mukhashaf and Mohammed Ghobari, "Yemeni, UAE troops seize Qaeda-held seaport city – residents," Reuters, April 24, 2016, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-security-qaeda/yemeni-uae-troops-seize-qaeda-held-seaport-city-residents-idUKKCN0XL0B4>.
- "Surprising UAE Decision to End War in Yemen," Rai al-Yawm, June 16, 2016, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=60896>.
- ²² Muhammad Samir, "After It Flourished at the UAE's Hands, MB Continues to Lie about Abu Dhabi's Role in Socotra," al-Fajr, April 6, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63458>.
- ²³ "Will KSA Conduct Radical Revision of its Alliances in Yemen?" Rai al-Yawm, April 4, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63429>.
- ²⁴ "Saudi Arabia 'Swallows Emirati Blade' in Hadramawt: Until When?" Al-Akhbar, April 28, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63629>.
- ²⁵ Taiz Khalid Hammadi, "Yemen: Hadi Toppled Aden Governor and Ministers Loyal to UAE After Bitter Conflict," al-Quds al-'Arabi, April 28, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63625>.
- "On the Crisis between Abu Dhabi, al-Riyad," Rai al-Yawm, April 28, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63641>.
- Stephen A. Seche, "Shaping the South: The UAE in Yemen," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, May 4, 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/shaping-south-uae-yemen/>.
- ²⁶ Mona Safwan, "Yemen's Surprise: Qatar is the Biggest Winner," Rai al-Yawm, May 8, 2017, <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=63726>.
- "In Yemen, Qatar's Support for Development vis-a-vis UAE's Suspicious Role," al-Waqt al-Akhbari, May 30, 2017, <http://www.alwaghtnews.net/news1302.html>.
- ²⁷ Snyder, "Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," 467.
- ²⁸ See Matteo Legrenzi and Fred H. Lawson, "Saudi Arabia Calls Out Hezbollah: Why Now?" Middle East Policy 23, no. 2 (2016): 31-43.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 471-472.
- ³⁰ Gabriele vom Bruck, "Qatar Crisis: Saudi Arabia as Anti-Hero?" Le Monde Diplomatique, June 27, 2017, <https://mondediplo.com/outsidein/qatar-crisis-saudi-arabia-as-anti-hero>.