



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Assessment of the Security Situation in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and the Arab Gulf States

Gulf Research Center
April 2013

© Gulf Research Center 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Gulf Research Center.

Assessment of the Security Situation in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and the Arab Gulf States

The Gulf region continues to be defined by multiple levels of security challenges that have an impact on the domestic, regional and international outlook for stability in this critical part of the world and beyond. On the one hand, the situation has changed little over the past few years as the perennial issue of the Iranian nuclear program, the persistent poverty, underdevelopment, and prospects of state failure in Yemen, and the uneven transition of Iraq out of its post-invasion phase continue to preoccupy policy officials, decision makers, and specialists alike. The region-specific issues are accompanied by the continued challenges emanating from terrorism, maritime security, piracy, transnational crime, and the lack of a regional security architecture. Lack of confidence and trust as well as (mis)perception of one another add to the complicated search for a resolution of at least some of these crises.

On the other hand, the threats and challenges have increased due in large part to the impact of the Arab revolutions since the outset of 2011 which have further affected the domestic security climate and consequently complicated the overall effort to bring about a more stable security situation. The agenda is thus full combined with the fact is that there are no easy policy solutions.

In the Gulf region, even the GCC states have found themselves impacted by the turmoil spreading throughout the region to the point that the social contract that has guided the relationship between the state and society over the past decades has begun to be questioned. A more contentious domestic political climate is accompanied by the fact that the GCC states have started to follow a more concerted interest-driven foreign policy and have in this context spearheaded Arab activism in such regional conflict situations as Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Far from many assessments, the GCC states are acting as agents of change abroad at the same time that they are pulling

together all efforts to maintain the status quo at home. Regionally, the prerogative is on a quick return to stability as evidenced by the GCC role in ensuring a transition in Yemen that so far, however, has failed to resolve some of the underlying issues in that country. This brief assessment of the key security issues confronting the Gulf region attempts to put current issues in their proper context and to highlight the key challenges determining the situation on the ground. The analysis was put together in March 2013 and therefore reflects developments as of this date. In addition to the situation in the Gulf countries – the GCC states, Iran, Iraq and Yemen – an analysis of developments in Syria as seen from the GCC states is also included given the wide-ranging implications and consequences this has for the geopolitical agenda in the entire Middle East and beyond.

Iraq

Security and stability in Iraq face a number of challenges. The ability of the present government of Mr. Nouri Al-Maliki to effectively tackle all the sources of threats is limited. Political conflict has further deepened the security crisis and weakened the government's resolve to deal with the most imminent problems. Overall, it can be stated that most of the security challenges emanate from developments related to the conflict among political groups and the struggle between religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups.

Terrorism remains a major source of instability. After a noticeable reduction during 2011, terrorist activities witnessed a remarkable escalation throughout 2012 and early 2013. This happened despite the large number of people arrested under the anti-terrorism law and all the countermeasures taken by the government to curtail terrorist activities. Terrorist groups still carry out major and multiple operations causing a large number of casualties. In September 2012 alone, no less than 365 Iraqis were killed and thousands injured as a result of terrorist attacks. Sectarian and ethnically motivated attacks remain very high. In August 2012, Prime Minister Maliki announced that the government had managed to eliminate terrorism in the country. However, this proved to be an inaccurate and premature judgment. Indeed, since the beginning of 2013, on average, over a hundred people have been killed every month as a result of terrorist attacks. The month of March 2013 witnessed a series of multiple terrorist attacks targeting most of the country's major cities, and a number of government offices in Baghdad.

The Arab-Kurdish conflict, or the conflict between the Federal government and the local government of the Kurdish autonomous region, remains very intense, especially over the control of the 'disputed areas' that consist of the entire province of

Kirkuk and large parts of Mosul, Salahaden, and Diyala provinces, and over the right to control oil wealth. In January 2013, a potential military confrontation between government and Kurdish forces was averted, but the situation has remained very tense since then. No diplomatic solution seems possible at the present time. In addition, terrorist groups have taken advantage of the escalating dispute and a number of devastating terrorist attacks have occurred throughout the 'disputed areas.'

The Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict is more serious than all other forms of conflicts and is a major factor in undermining the security and stability of Iraq. Apart from the conflict at the political and social levels, the sectarian conflict has manifested itself in innumerable and deadly terrorist attacks, which have claimed the life of many thousands, carried out by both sides of the sectarian spectrum. The policy of the present government is not helping in reducing the intensity of this conflict. Instead, the government of Prime Minister Maliki has been accused of adopting a policy of sectarian discrimination. Popular protests in the Arab-Sunni heartland in Anbar province continued in March. In response, the government offered some concessions but the gap between what the government offered and the demands of the Arab-Sunni protesters remains very wide and is unlikely to be bridged easily.

External factors have also been undermining Iraqi stability. The prolonged bloody conflict in neighboring Syria is contributing to the instability in Iraq and has underlined that a spillover is likely to extend the conflict to Iraq. The US has identified one Islamic group fighting the Syrian regime (al-Nasrah group) as a terrorist group and as an offshoot of the Al-Qaeda in Iraq organization (The Islamic State of Iraq) establishing a strong link between the groups fighting the Iraqi government and the one fighting the Syrian regime.

Thus, stability in Iraq remains elusive. The political environment since the 2003 US occupation of the country has undermined the basic foundations of the old state. The deliberate dismantling of the state's structure has led to the disintegration of its society, gradual degradation of the Iraqi national identity, and a rise in subnational loyalties. This has become the main source of sectarian and ethnic conflict in Iraq post-occupation and the platform for terrorist activities.

Yemen

Yemen as a state has been in existence for thousands of years, but it has always been plagued by problems. The mother of all problems in Yemen is the weakness of the state vis-à-vis other power centers. Historically, the tribal structure has fiercely competed with the state and made every effort to limit its power. In the meantime, the

Arab Spring experience in Yemen has a special dimension as Yemen was the only Arab Spring state where the previous regime departed in an agreed and negotiated manner. Yet, the departure of President Saleh's regime did not produce stability in the country and major security challenges remain.

Terrorist activities of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Yemen's branch of al-Qaeda), in particular, continue to be a major factor contributing to instability in the state. The organization is able to operate in different parts of the country although it is active primarily in the southern part (the territories of the old South Yemen Republic) which has become the center of the group's activities. The capital Sana'a and other cities in the north witness occasional attacks, though few can be considered as major attacks. In recent months, al-Qaeda terrorists have successfully carried out a large number of assassinations, claiming the life of many politicians, army and security officers, and other government officials. Kidnapping of foreigners is another tactic that seems to be on the rise, as ransom money is useful for financing terrorist activities. Most of the terrorist attacks during the past year targeted Yemeni military institutions, including military bases, checkpoints, and headquarters. The US has increased its role by directly fighting al-Qaeda inside Yemen, using its air force capability, mainly through drone attacks. In mid-2009, Yemen's then President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to allow a US 'shadow war' against Islamist militants. Since then, direct US involvement in the counterterrorism war has escalated. In 2012, the number of drone assassination strikes increased dramatically (estimates put the number at 53) and an unknown number of intelligence gathering missions were carried out. The drone strikes figure for 2012 represents a three-fold increase from the figures for 2011; yet in 2013, the US is seeking to further expand its covert drone operations. The Saudis also are heavily involved in the intelligence war against al-Qaeda militants. The US-Saudi-Yemeni cooperation has put some pressure on the militants and resulted in the killing and arrest of a large number of members of the organization.

At the same time, US-Saudi involvement in support of Yemeni counterterrorism efforts has encouraged the militants to punish the Yemeni military institution for its 'collaboration' with outside powers, leading to intensified attacks against it, along with the growing anti-American sentiment shaped by the popular protest against innocent civilian deaths in US drone attacks. Despite all the criticism directed against the US drone operations, the drone strategy has proved very effective in curtailing al-Qaeda activities in Yemen, and in many cases has put the organization on the defensive as members of the group cannot predict the time or location of the next drone operation. Most of those attacks have proven to be highly devastating and accurate attacks.

Beyond the issue of terrorism, there is also the issue of armed revolt inside Yemen. The Houthi rebellion, which has continued since 2004 in the north of the country, is no less menacing to the security and stability of Yemen than the terrorist activities. The Houthi militias are now in control of a large area of north Yemen, particularly the province of Saada, and part of Al-Jawf, Amran, and Hajjah provinces. Since the start of the Arab Spring in Yemen, Houthi elements have moved to establish a substantial presence in Sana'a. The declared objectives of the Houthis are focused mainly on the demand that "government should not interfere in their affairs." The 'no-government interference' demand indicates recognition of the de facto control of the Houthis over their areas. The Houthi movement is an ideological-religious movement working for the new version of the Zaidi sect closer to the Twelver Shi'ism (Iranian-Iraqi school), and promoting the idea of the imminent reappearance of Imam Mahdi (the prophesied redeemer of Islam before the Day of Judgment who will rid the world of evil). Thus, the combination of creed, arms, tribal loyalty, and revolt in a difficult geographical area has proven to be very hard to deal with for any government.

The alleged link between the Houthis and Iran adds another serious dimension of external interference in Yemeni internal affairs. The impact of the Houthi armed revolt is not confined to Yemen only, as the rebels control the area located along Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia. The movement is considered to be an actual and direct threat to the stability and security of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and potentially of the entire GCC states. Many security officials in the GCC believe that the Houthi experiment in north Yemen could be an emulation of the Hizbollah experience in south Lebanon, an attempt by an external power to create a "state within a state."

Then there is the issue of separatism. The Southern separatist movement is another destabilizing issue in the Yemen of today and another major security challenge facing the state. Though the military dimension of the issue remains limited so far and geographically confined to certain cities in the south of the country, the government is unable to control the situation. Yet, the separatist movement still enjoys no support from any regional state or external power, though the Yemeni government has accused Iran of providing some backing to certain factions of the southern separatist movement.

The call to convene a "National Dialog", which was part of the agreement between the government and the opposition to settle the political and security dilemma, is facing many problems. A number of opposition groups, including the southern separatist movement, have in fact decided to boycott the process.

Iran

Iran's nuclear program and the actual nature and objectives of this program remain a major area of dispute and a cause for suspicion between Iran and the international community. The military option is off the table at present. This is due to the developments in the Syrian crisis and also to the fact that the recent sanctions imposed by the US, EU and other countries have proven quite effective in crippling the Iranian economy. Such economic/financial pressure, however, requires time to generate an effective political pressure that, in turn, could then shift political attitudes.

In recent months, there are indications from Iran's dealing with the IAEA and from intelligence sources that the progress of the Iran nuclear program is slowing. Whether this is being done intentionally or due to technical or financial difficulties is difficult to determine. But such a slowdown could indicate that Iran might be willing to consider some sort of compromise. The 5+1 talks, the only active mechanism for direct negotiations with Iran, suffer from Iran's lack of cooperation with the IAEA, and progress is still incremental and patchy. The March 2013 meeting in Almaty was inconclusive, yet it offered to lift some sanctions if Iran scales back nuclear activity.

Certainly, an agreement on the nuclear file could open the door wide for the rehabilitation of Iran and, possibly, restoration of US-Iran relations. Such a development could have far-reaching consequences on a number of issues region-wide, among them the strategic balance in the Gulf region, the oil/gas market, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Both sides – the present Iranian leadership and the Obama Administration in the US – have a strong desire to find an end to the decades-long US-Iran conflict. Both sides believe that Obama's second term as US President offers a unique opportunity to settle most, if not all the outstanding issues. It is the assessment here that the Iranians understand the need to move soon and accept the US open invitation to start direct talks. But such a move needs to be preceded by progress on the key issue of the nuclear file.

The Iranian presidential election set for June 14, 2013 is not very significant, and one is unlikely to see any surprises – thus, another hardliner approved by the Supreme Leader will be elected. The regime is keen to avoid the problem which occurred in the 2009 election and in this context, no moderate or reformer will be allowed to stand for the upcoming election. The Iranian political system is based on the idea of "selection, then election" which means that no candidate can contest elections before he or she passes the selection process by the regime's special committees first. This is considered to be an effective filtration mechanism to deny the opposition any

chance to participate in the actual decision-making process. Further, the structure of decision making in the Iranian system, especially regarding strategic decisions, is that decisions are taken collectively, and the final say belongs to the Supreme Leader.

Syria

The regime of Mr. Bashar Al-Assad has lost prestige, power, control, and legitimacy. For the past 40 years, the regime has ruled by oppression. Now, the people have lost their fear, ultimately meaning that the regime will be unable to survive. As of March 2013, the regime has lost control over nearly 60 percent of the territory of the state. The capital Damascus is witnessing daily clashes and part of the city is under the control of the rebels. What one is seeing is the gradual degradation of the regime's control. The final collapse will not be swift but it is unavoidable and inevitable.

The real issue in the spring of 2013 is the supply of advanced arms to the Syrian rebels. A strong US-Israel veto is standing in the face of the Gulf States' willingness to provide arms in order to end the conflict on the battlefield and not at the negotiations table. Very little room is left for a diplomatic solution. The regime's conditions, namely staying in power and supervising reforms, will not be acceptable to the rebels, nor to the many regional states. The real problems and challenges will come after the regime's downfall. Strategically, Syria is a vital state for the stability of the entire Middle East. The main issue now is the lack of unity among the different rebel groups and the absence of effective leadership. A major concern is also the role of Islamic extremist groups in the revolution and their effective efforts on the battlefield. The Islamic extremists will demand their share of power in the post-Assad regime.

The establishment of an opposition government in late March 2013 was aimed at de-legitimizing the Ba'ath government in Damascus and to facilitate the efforts to secure arms for the rebel forces as 'the legitimate government of the country.' The balance of power on the Syrian battlefield between the government forces and the rebel forces could prolong the struggle and sustain the current 'no winner and no loser' scenario. Such a situation, if continued for long, is likely to transform the Syrian revolution from, mostly, an internal conflict to a regional one.

The GCC States

The Arab Spring storm has passed over the GCC states with minimum damage. Two factors contributed to the ability of these states to withstand the crisis: legitimacy and money. The legitimacy of the Gulf monarchies has proven much stronger than many anticipated. For anyone wondering how these 'medieval' regimes have survived,

one has only to look at history to discover that these regimes have proven adaptable and have a greater degree of flexibility than all the Republican dictatorships. Their basic legitimacy factor has not been challenged or shaken. At the same time, the demands for political and economic reform remain strong and valid.

The money factor was also effective. Most of the GCC governments moved fast and approved financial packages that sought to improve the citizens' living standards. Besides, they approved a number of major and costly social security and welfare projects and initiated major national development projects in health, education, and public services. Such steps have placated the immediate demands by some protesters for the time being, but they have not resolved the underlying problematic. The policy of economic hand-outs has raised two other dilemmas. For one, the policy has strengthened dependence of the population on the state and therefore decreased incentives for participation in the private sector. This is bound to have a negative impact on economic diversification efforts and therefore make it more difficult for GCC governments to solve the perennial unemployment problem, the underlying factor in the protests seen so far. Second, there are questions as to how long a policy of increased state spending can be maintained in light of ever rising dependence on a high oil price environment to finance such spending.

The unfortunate experience of Arab Spring revolutions in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, has had an additional discouraging effect on the GCC citizens. The bloodletting and the destruction of infrastructure is seen as a negative outcome, and the level of violence deterred and turned many Arab people away from the path of the Arab Spring. The people of the GCC, unlike the people of other Arab states, have something to lose.

Yet, the major challenge in states like Saudi Arabia, as well as some other GCC states, remains youth unemployment and the issue of the unemployable due to the chronic failure and shortcomings of the education and training systems. These problem areas remain insufficiently addressed and from a structural point of view, they are not being addressed at all.

Meanwhile, the issue of succession remains at the heart of the political problem, especially in states like Saudi Arabia. The process of the introduction to power of a new generation from the ruling houses remains very slow and unstructured. This is causing deep concern inside and outside the region.

Overall, the GCC states cannot remain stable and free of trouble without embarking on a substantial, visionary, and well-structured reform process. The people of the GCC have their expectations and wish to see evolution, not revolution. They wish

to see a phased and gradual progress toward democracy, wider participation, and real transparency and accountability. Such demands have now become a public issue and cannot be ignored for long.

In the GCC states, a new social contract needs to be worked out. Economic rights and welfare measures cannot be a substitute, or a trade-in for political rights – such principles are no longer acceptable, or rationally justified. The old social contract which remained valid to this day has expired. In the past four decades, the social and political environment has substantially and rapidly changed inside the GCC states as well as outside. The current social contract between the ruling houses of the GCC states and their subjects, based on tribal values and traditions, cannot be sustained for long. Yet, very few, if any of the citizens of the GCC states believe that resorting to violent means is the right way to secure political demands. What they wish to see is a revolution from the palaces not from the street. They are hoping that the ruling houses of the GCC will take the initiative and introduce meaningful reforms. To what degree this will happen, however, remains very much in doubt given developments through March 2013.



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

www.grc.net