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The Persian Gulf States and Afghanistan: Regional Geopolitics and Competing Interests

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

The three Persian Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have dominated the Middle East's engagement with Afghanistan over the past three decades. This is unlikely to change as Afghanistan faces twin security and political challenges arising from the pullback of foreign troops and a presidential election in 2014. Buffeted by three years of upheaval across the Arab world, the primary objective of Saudi and Emirati officials in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi after the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will be to prevent Afghanistan from unraveling in ways that could threaten the balance of power in the broader regional neighborhood. This reflects the fact that the Iranian shadow looms large over foreign policy formulation in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as does a feeling of incomprehension at recent U.S. decisions on Syria and nuclear negotiations with Iran. Together, these two trends have triggered a more assertive regional policy as leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have increasingly made unilateral decisions to secure national interests. Qatari policy, by contrast, is likely to become more introspective as the new emir focuses on domestic issues and repairing diplomatic relationships damaged by his father's foreign policy adventurism.

The Persian Gulf States and Afghanistan

In different ways, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have long records of involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in the post-1979 era. During the 1980s, Saudi Arabia was a key financier of the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation, both through official state channels and informal contributions from private citizens and charities. This occurred as the al-Saud responded to the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamist militants by placing greater emphasis on what Thomas

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Hegghammer has labelled “alarmist pan-Islamism.”¹ Although Saudi Arabia was one of three countries (along with the UAE and Pakistan) to recognize the Taliban regime after it took power in 1996, relations frayed in 1998 when the Taliban rebuffed Saudi requests to return Osama bin Laden to the kingdom. Nevertheless, it was only after the September 11 terrorist attacks that ties were broken altogether, whereupon Riyadh gave its backing to the new Afghan government of Hamid Karzai and supported it with reconstruction assistance and direct foreign aid.²

As mentioned above, the UAE also extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime prior to September 11. Steve Coll has recounted how, shortly after the African embassy bombings in August 1998, a U.S. retaliatory strike against a hunting camp in western Afghanistan where bin Laden was believed to be taking refuge had to be aborted after surveillance imagery indicated that high-level UAE officials, possibly including members of the ruling family, might be present.³ A post-September 11 investigation by U.S. Treasury officials led to accusations that Dubai was a conduit for Taliban gold reserves, and small aircraft reportedly laden with gold were allegedly permitted to depart Dubai and Sharjah for Kabul and Kandahar in the days following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001.⁴ Similar to Saudi Arabia, the UAE quickly switched its support to the Karzai government and by 2009 was providing 14% of its total foreign aid budget to Afghanistan.⁵ Less promisingly, the collapse of the real-estate bubble in Dubai in 2008 led in part to the failure of the Da Kabul bank two years later amid persistent allegations of widespread corruption at the heart of the Karzai government (and family) that saw over \$3 billion in cash being flown out of Afghanistan. Much of the money was believed to end up in Dubai either as luxury investments that subsequently turned sour during the financial crisis or to benefit from its tight banking secrecy laws.⁶

¹ Thomas Hegghammer, “Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia,” *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2008): 704.

² Guido Steinberg and Nils Woermer, “Exploring Iran & Saudi Arabia’s Interests in Afghanistan & Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers—A Zero Sum Game?” Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, April 2013, 3 ~ http://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/exploring_iran_saudi_arabia_s_interests_in_afghanistan_pakistan_stakeholders_or_spoilers_a_zero_sum_game_part_2_iran.

³ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 447–49.

⁴ Christopher Davidson, “Dubai: The Security Dimensions of the Region’s Premier Free Port,” *Middle East Policy* 15, no. 2 (2008): 145.

⁵ “UAE Has Done Exemplary Work in Afghanistan,” *Gulf News*, August 25, 2011.

⁶ Matthew Rosenberg, “Corruption Suspected in Airlift of Billions in Cash from Kabul,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2010.

Qatar has less of a backstory in Afghanistan, but in 2012 a delegation of eight senior Taliban representatives arrived in Doha to set up an office in preparation for mediation talks with members of the Afghan High Peace Council. The envoy included Tayeb Agha, the former chief of staff to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, as well as the Taliban-era ministers of health and planning and the Taliban's former ambassadors to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, in a sign of how seriously the Taliban initially took the meeting.⁷ However, an attempt in June 2013 to open talks among Taliban, Afghan government, and U.S. officials ended in failure before discussions even started when Afghan officials withdrew in fury after the Taliban erected signs and flags referring to their Doha office by the pre-2001 label of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.⁸

On balance, the assistance extended by the three gulf states to post-conflict reconstruction and recovery in Afghanistan has been positive. In addition to a small number of troops provided by the UAE to ISAF, Saudi Arabia co-chaired the January 2002 donors' conference in Tokyo and pledged more than \$220 million for humanitarian and infrastructure projects, which included a \$30 million road-construction program to link together the northern and western regions of Afghanistan.⁹ The UAE also gave generously, and it is likely that Saudi and Emirati donations were in part intended to signal their support for the U.S.-led political transition following their earlier and, in the context of September 11, highly problematic ties with the Taliban.¹⁰

As Afghanistan moves uncertainly toward a post-ISAF and post-Karzai era, the way that Persian Gulf states evaluate developments in Kabul will change. In a climate of disappointment over the Obama administration's Middle East policies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE recently have become more assertive in taking unilateral action to safeguard their interests. This proactivity could extend to Afghanistan if officials in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi feel that other regional states may make political gains or fill any potential security vacuum at the expense of Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Yet the conflict in Syria, where Qatar and Saudi Arabia have backed rival

⁷ Rod Nordland, "Peace Envoys from Taliban at Loose End in Qatar," *New York Times*, April 9, 2013.

⁸ Rod Nordland and Alissa J. Rubin, "Taliban Flag Is Gone in Qatar, But Talks Remain in Doubt," *New York Times*, June 23, 2013.

⁹ Sultan Barakat and Steven Zyck, "Gulf State Assistance to Conflict-Affected Environments," London School of Economics and Political Science, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper, no. 10, July 2010, 21–24.

¹⁰ Barakat and Zyck, "Gulf State Assistance to Conflict-Affected Environments."

militias and competing political groups, highlights the challenge to stability posed by such unilateral decisions.¹¹

Areas of Engagement

In addition to the issues outlined above, there are three areas that could form the backbone of Persian Gulf states' future engagement with Afghanistan. First, these states could serve as mediators between the warring parties, particularly given that gulf officials can utilize a wider range of contacts than is available to Western interlocutors. In addition to the abovementioned Qatari effort to host peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in 2013, Saudi Arabia also sponsored two rounds of secret negotiations in late 2008 and early 2009.¹² Although both initiatives proved unsuccessful, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE could underpin any offer of dialogue with material incentives to the participants through promises of aid and investment. Such inducements have been prominent hallmarks of their engagement with states in transition in the Middle East and North Africa in the post-Arab Spring period, particularly in the case of Qatari mediatory initiatives. The intensity of Qatar's diplomatic outreach, nevertheless, is expected to diminish under the new leadership in Doha.¹³

Aid and investment therefore constitute the second area of likely engagement with Afghanistan. As high-income developing countries, the three gulf states have historically prioritized quick-impact interventions into conflict-affected states, mostly (but not exclusively) in the Arab and Islamic world. Humanitarian and religious motivations underpin much of this aid, but its effectiveness is undermined by the absence of credible monitoring and assessment mechanisms or a longer-term commitment to sustainable development. Further challenges associated with gulf assistance programs include a paucity of data on the amounts and types of aid provided, the relative lack of transparency in both the aid-tracking process and the eventual use of funds in recipient countries, and often a lack of concern for the results or impact of interventions.¹⁴

¹¹ Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?" *Time*, September 18, 2012.

¹² Steinberg and Woermer, "Exploring Iran & Saudi Arabia's Interests in Afghanistan & Pakistan," 3.

¹³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Foreign Policy Implications of the New Emir's Succession in Qatar," Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center (NOREF), Policy Brief, September 2013, 1.

¹⁴ Barakat and Zyck, "Gulf State Assistance to Conflict-Affected Environments," 42.

A major barrier to foreign investment in Afghanistan is the real or perceived lack of security in many areas, coupled with uncertainty regarding the post-2014 transition. Thus, a third avenue of potential gulf engagement with Kabul is the growing reputation of the UAE as a regional leader in security-sector reform. The UAE and Afghanistan signed a long-term strategic partnership in August 2013, and Dubai is set to host the inaugural Afghanistan Security & Stability Summit in January 2014.¹⁵ With a thriving private security sector, the UAE is well-placed to take the lead on internal and external issues such as border control, reorganization of the police and security service, and the physical protection of critical infrastructure. Meaningful and sustained progress on stabilizing Afghanistan is essential in order to reverse the current flight of capital from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf.

Regional and Strategic Concerns

Gulf states' policy options in Afghanistan inevitably fall into a wider context of regional and strategic concerns. The weakness of the central government in Kabul has for twenty years provided opportunities for neighboring states to develop close links with proxy groups within Afghanistan. Although they do not share borders with Afghanistan and cannot be considered "front-line" states, Saudi and Emirati approaches to Afghanistan are influenced heavily by their diverging relationships with two of the most active external actors, Pakistan and Iran. Regional considerations will likely increase in importance once the degree of predictability granted by the presence of ISAF forces in Afghanistan is removed and a new presidential administration is in place in Kabul.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE enjoy very close political, economic, and security ties with Pakistan. Connections between the General Intelligence Directorate in Riyadh and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate in Islamabad have constituted a cornerstone of Saudi-Pakistani relations since the 1980s. These form part of a broader security arrangement that may also encompass a "nuclear pact," whereby Saudi Arabia is believed to have invested in Pakistani nuclear projects in return for the right to acquire or deploy nuclear devices in a time of crisis.¹⁶ For its part, the UAE is one of the largest investors in Pakistan through a combination of both public and

¹⁵ Embassy of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan and UAE Sign Agreements on Security Cooperation and Transfer of Sentenced Persons," August 4, 2013 ~ <http://afghanistanembassy.org.uk/more80.html>.

¹⁶ Mark Urban, "Saudi Nuclear Weapons 'On Order' from Pakistan," BBC News, November 6, 2013.

private capital flows across sectors ranging from defense to agriculture and finance by way of renewable energy and infrastructure projects. Together, these projects made the UAE the largest foreign investor in Pakistan in 2012, with additional multibillion-dollar agreements in construction adding to the total in 2013.¹⁷

Saudi Arabia's relationship with Iran is very different. Since the Iranian revolution that ousted the shah in 1979, the two countries have emerged as bitter rivals for regional ascendancy in the Persian Gulf, with Saudi Arabia providing large-scale support to Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War. Disputes between Riyadh and Tehran, as leading proponents respectively of Sunni and Shia Islam, frequently take on a sectarian dimension that has raised tensions sharply across the Middle East over the past decade. In an atmosphere of mutual mistrust and acrimony, this rivalry extends into Afghanistan. For example, Saudi Arabia's 2012 announcement that it will construct a large Islamic complex in Kabul featuring a university, hospital, and mosque with a 15,000-person capacity was seen as a response to the massive Iranian-built Khatam al-Nabyeen Islamic University, which opened in the capital in 2006.¹⁸

Given that Iran has been a high-profile supporter of the Karzai government both politically and economically and also enjoys close trading and cultural links with western provinces and cities, the election of a new Afghan president in April 2014 may trigger a competition among regional states for access to and influence over the new incumbent.¹⁹ It is probable that the Saudi (and, to a lesser extent, the Emirati) rivalry with Iran will be the most contentious, as each of the protagonists attempts to preserve its existing leverage and develop new networks of patronage within the successor government to President Karzai. In such an environment, actions will likely be as reactive as they are proactive, depending on the degree to which the Afghan political transition unfolds smoothly.

In their responses to the Arab Spring, the Persian Gulf states have become more forceful in projecting their interests abroad. The undermining of prevailing assumptions about the United States' policies in support of regional geopolitical interests and regime stability among its allies in the Middle East has induced feelings of deep ambivalence in

¹⁷ Sanaya Pavri, "UAE Leads Investment in Pakistani Business," *Gulf News*, August 14, 2013.

¹⁸ Frud Bezhan, "Saudi Arabia Positions Itself for Larger Afghan Role," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 5, 2012.

¹⁹ Stina Torjesen, "Afghanistan and the Regional Powers: History Not Repeating Itself?" NOREF, Policy Brief, October 2013, 3–4.

Gulf capitals about whether they can still rely on their foremost external ally. As the United States prepares to downgrade its military presence in Afghanistan and transition toward a new political order in Kabul, external actors will be evaluating developments with a mixture of nervousness and opportunism. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as regional powers with an international reach, possess both the capability and the intent to play an important role in post-Karzai Afghanistan. Whether this proves to be stabilizing or not will depend largely on the trajectory of events in Afghanistan in 2014, as well as on how the triangular U.S.-Gulf-Iran nexus unfolds from Geneva to Syria.