



The Afghanistan Episode

A “Road to Damascus” Moment in US-Gulf Relations?

Clemens Chay

Series Introduction

The Afghanistan Crisis: Anxieties and Trigger Points

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a geopolitical free-for-all situation in the country, with regional, if not, extra-regional implications. It ceded the country swiftly to Taliban control, with China, Russia, and Iran all poised to forge close relationships with the new Afghan government.

International players like Qatar, Turkey and Pakistan, which have had functional relations with the Taliban, have sought constructive engagement with the new government, to the extent of opening a pathway for them into the international system. Others, particularly the Central Asian states, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, are disquieted by security concerns, terrorism-related or otherwise. In Europe, the immediate impact of events in Afghanistan is having to manage a massive refugee crisis.

This series of *Insights* examines the implications of the US disengagement from Afghanistan, ranging from strategic openings in interstate relations to ground-level anxieties.

Cover photo: Guests arriving for the opening ceremony of the Taliban Political Office in Doha, Qatar, on 18 June 2013. Faisal Al-Tamimi/AFP.

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Clemens Chay*

This article addresses the critical humanitarian role played by the Arab Gulf states in the wake of the Afghanistan debacle and examines the interests and concerns that drove this role. It then examines the geopolitical shifts in the region as well as the politics of basing in the US-Gulf relationship, which has been the subject of intense scrutiny since the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The article argues that side-lining its Gulf partners could complicate the United States’ ability to manage crises with regional/global implications, such as Afghanistan, and now, Ukraine — and, worse, result in needless friction.

On 16 February 2022, a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) delegation met with Taliban representatives in Qatar for the first time as a regional grouping. Describing the engagement, Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, the GCC assistant secretary-general for political affairs and negotiation, wrote that it “did not imply political recognition

of the new order”]; instead, he said, addressing humanitarian needs and combating terrorism was of the “utmost importance” for the GCC.¹

While GCC aid and assistance to Afghanistan indicate support for the United States in managing the consequences of its hasty withdrawal of troops in August 2021, the perceived vacuum left by such a retreat has forced the Gulf states to rethink their relationship with a longstanding security guarantor. Indeed, their interest in Afghanistan is undeniably linked to regional security concerns — the fear of the knock-on effects posed by Taliban rule on extremist Islamist movements.

With the luxury of hindsight, also provided by the events that transpired in the recent Russia-Ukraine crisis, it is evident that the US-Gulf relationship is wading through a shaky stage. Perceiving Washington to be less invested in Middle Eastern affairs, the Gulf states are hedging their bets in different external partners, warming up to rivals, and leveraging their role in global energy security.

Humanitarian Aid with an Eye on Washington

On balance, the Gulf states have had a consistent and noteworthy track record in their extension of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, despite the ebbs and flows of fragmented politics in the country. Monetary diplomacy following the toppling of the first Taliban government was in part conducted as a show of support for the US-led political transition. This was particularly so for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which had recognised the Taliban regime before 9/11, but quickly switched sides later to back the Hamid Karzai government after the US-led invasion

¹ Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, “GCC holds first meeting with Afghanistan’s de facto rulers”, *Arab News*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2026246>.

that toppled the Islamist group in late 2001.² The UAE, for instance, committed 14 per cent of its total foreign aid in 2009³ and deployed troops, first sending in support staff, then reinforcing its presence with military trainers in 2018.⁴ Saudi Arabia has a history of mobilising donors for Afghanistan, from co-chairing a 2002 conference in Tokyo to, more recently, prodding members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) into setting up a humanitarian trust fund for the country.⁵

“On balance, the Gulf states have had a consistent and noteworthy track record in their extension of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, despite the ebbs and flows of fragmented politics in the country.”

Qatar and Kuwait too have spared no effort in rendering aid: the former has been consistent in shipping food and medical aid⁶ on top of

² Kristian Ulrichsen, “The Persian Gulf States and Afghanistan: Regional Geopolitics and Competing Interests”, *Asia Policy* 17 (2014): 48–49.

³ Gulf News Editorial, “UAE has done exemplary work in Afghanistan”, 25 August 2011, <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/editorials/uae-has-done-exemplary-work-in-afghanistan-1.856680>.

⁴ Reuters, “UAE to boost troop presence in Afghanistan for training: officials”, 8 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-emirates-idUSKCN1J41E7>.

⁵ Al Jazeera, “OIC nations pledge fund to prevent Afghanistan economic collapse”, 19 December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/19/oic-nations-pledge-fund-to-prevent-afghanistan-economic-collapse>.

⁶ Asmahan Qatarjoui, “Qatar sends 22 tonnes of aid to crises-laden Afghanistan,” *Doha News*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.dohanews.co/qatar-sends-22-tonnes-of-aid-to-crises-laden-afghanistan/>.

US\$50 million worth of financial contributions,⁷ while the latter has issued loans and disbursed funds for food security under its development arm, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development.⁸

What stands out amid the Gulf countries' overall contributions to Afghanistan has, however, little to do with money politics. Rather, it was their role in the large-scale and challenging evacuation exercise last August as the United States exited Afghanistan. Bilal Saab of the Middle East Institute (Washington DC), lauded these efforts: describing their efforts as “nothing short of indispensable”, he singled out how the Qatari ambassador safely escorted Americans through the streets of Kuwait and how the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait all played a part in serving as transit hubs for evacuees.⁹

“What stands out amid the Gulf countries' overall contributions to Afghanistan ... was their role in the large-scale and challenging evacuation exercise last August as the United States exited Afghanistan.”

The United States was also able to use its military bases and facilities across the Gulf, including Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, US naval

⁷ Asmahan Qarjoui, “Qatar’s monetary assistance to Afghanistan reach \$50 million: official”, *Doha News*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.dohanews.co/qatars-monetary-assistance-to-afghanistan-to-reach-50-million-official/>.

⁸ See statistics cited in annual reports on the fund’s website, <https://www.kuwait-fund.org/en/web/kfund/home>.

⁹ Bilal Saab, “In Afghanistan, the Gulf Arab states stepped”, Middle East Institute (Washington, DC), 1 September 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistan-gulf-arab-states-stepped>.

forces in Bahrain, and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, to ensure the safe passage of its nationals from Afghanistan. As Saab notes, despite the criticism directed at the Gulf states for their “meagre military contributions” to the US-led counterterrorism campaign directed at the so-called Islamic State (IS) group, the monarchies “deserve a ton of credit” for safeguarding “collective interests”. According to Kirsten Fontenrose of the Atlantic Council, the UAE, which played a role in airlifting 39,000 people,¹⁰ was surprised by how poorly the US withdrawal was conducted and the sentiment is that Abu Dhabi was “tired of cleaning up after the mistakes of others”.¹¹

“Should the [US refugee] resettlement process be expedited for the Ukrainian refugees, it will not only further expose Western bias, but also create tensions with the Gulf countries currently hosting Afghans on a temporary basis.”

The corollary management of the refugee situation will only complicate US-Gulf ties, even if the monarchies earned a great deal of diplomatic credit during the evacuation exercise. Hundreds of Afghans in a UAE facility protested in February against the protracted

¹⁰ The National News, “The UAE’s Solidarity with Afghanistan”, 29 August 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/editorial/2021/08/27/the-uacs-solidarity-with-afghanistan/>.

¹¹ Kirsten Fontenrose, “What the Arab Gulf Is Thinking after the Afghanistan Withdrawal”, The Atlantic Council, 23 September 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-the-arab-gulf-is-thinking-after-the-afghanistan-withdrawal/>.

resettlement process, which was supposed to take them to America.¹² According to findings by the NGO Rise to Peace, conditions within the Emirates Humanitarian City — where Afghan migrants are housed — are “less than adequate” but the largest impediment remains “the lack of resources to process the necessary paperwork”.¹³ David Fitzgerald, in his book *Refuge Beyond Reach*, described the refugee reception in the Middle East and North Africa as an “architecture of repulsion” — a metaphor that posits how the global North keeps refugees from reaching their territories.¹⁴ While the Biden administration restored the refugee admission programme — dismantled under the Trump administration — the admission cap of 125,000 refugees announced in October 2021 has now been superseded by its latest statement pledging to accept up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees. How this process will be conducted in a “system that was overstretched even before tens of thousands of Afghans [...] joined the yearslong backlog in recent months” remains to be seen.¹⁵ Should the resettlement process be expedited for the

¹² Alexander Cornwell, “Afghan refugees in UAE protest months-long wait for resettlement”, Reuters, 11 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/afghan-refugees-uae-protest-halt-us-relocation-process-2022-02-10/>.

¹³ Chris Ynclan Jr., “Guests in the Gulf: Afghans in the UAE,” Rise to Peace, 3 January 2022, <https://www.risetopeace.org/2022/01/03/guests-in-the-gulf-afghans-in-the-uae/chrisynclan/>.

¹⁴ See also David Fitzgerald, “Remote Control of Migration: Theorising Territoriality, Shared Coercion, And Deterrence”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 1 (2019): 4–22.

¹⁵ Miriam Jordan and Michael D. Shear, “US will welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees”, *The New York Times*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/us/ukrainian-refugees-biden.html>. See also Kathryn Libal and Scott Harding, “Will Biden’s plan to resettle Afghans transform the US refugee program?”, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 11 December 2021. Most Afghans brought to the United States have been accorded “humanitarian parole” status, which does not automatically afford them opportunities to work or grant an immediate pathway to permanent residency in the United States.

Ukrainian refugees, it will not only further expose Western bias, but also create tensions with the Gulf countries currently hosting Afghans on a temporary basis.

Anxieties Arising from an Altered Afghanistan

Regional stability remains a key concern of the Gulf states as far as Afghanistan is situated within the orbit of a potential (in)security spillover. Stability is understood here to involve two overlapping elements in Afghanistan's domestic situation. First, the Gulf monarchies will be wary of how governance under the Taliban evolves,¹⁶ and whether the country will slip into the list of "failed states", defined as states "incapable of projecting power and asserting authority within their own borders, leaving their territories governmentally empty".¹⁷ With Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Yemen having succumbed to instability, and where individual Gulf states have, at some stage, partaken in proxy wars or competitions, the monarchies will be prudent about devoting further resources to another regional conflict. The threat to these countries from Afghanistan is overshadowed by the threat from Iraq, both in the latter's proximity to the Gulf states and the degree of influence Iran wields there. Iran and the Taliban do have a working relationship given their interest in managing sources of bilateral tension, including water politics and common threats, notably, the threat of IS-K, the IS affiliate operating in the Khorasan region encompassing northern Afghanistan

¹⁶ For signs of infighting between Taliban factions, see, for instance, Michael Kugelman, "Opinion: How real is the threat of Taliban infighting?", Deutsche Welle, 21 September 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-how-real-is-the-threat-of-taliban-infighting/a-59250547>.

¹⁷ Romain Malejacq, "Warlords, Intervention, and State Consolidation: A Typology of Political Orders in Weak and Failed States", *Security Studies* 25 (2016): 88–89.

and northeastern Iran,¹⁸ but Iranian influence — the main concern of the Gulf states and the United States — runs comparatively deeper in Iraq.¹⁹

“Al Qaida’s possible regrouping would be an ominous sign indeed for the Gulf states.”

Second, the threat of Al Qaida and the rebirth of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists remain important considerations in US-Gulf cooperation. Al Qaida’s possible regrouping would be an ominous sign indeed for the Gulf states. Top Pentagon officials gather that Al Qaida could “reconstitute in two years”. Carter Malkasian, previously a political advisor to US forces in Afghanistan, wrote in his book that, as part of the delegation negotiating the February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Agreement, he received a series of “disturbingly illuminating” questions from a Taliban representative, inadvertently indicating “just how close the Taliban and its leadership were to Al Qaida”.²⁰ Taliban–Al Qaida

¹⁸ Giorgio Cafiero, “What to Expect for Taliban-Iran relations”, *TRT World*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/what-to-expect-for-taliban-iran-relations-53928>.

¹⁹ Anthony Cordesman, “America’s Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 3 January 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf>. A retired senior Kuwaiti minister who requested anonymity concurred that a Shi’a-led Iraqi government has been a constant source of anxiety among Gulf authorities, not only owing to the rampant corruption within, but also because of strong Iranian links.

²⁰ See the chapter titled “Peace Talks”, in Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Malkasian also wrote that Al Qaida cells were hanging, on with smaller branches in Badakhshan, Kunduz, Logar,

links were further affirmed by Masoud Andarabi, interior minister in the Ashraf Ghani government:

The Taliban and other terrorist groups' relationship is as one — there is no difference. They are the tactical arm for Taliban's fighting capability. Al Qaida, [...] the twenty groups that are there, are very much with the Taliban. The foreign fighters have become part of the Afghan landscape; they have been there for twenty years for the Taliban forces, giving them money and support and making ammunition.²¹

Windows of Opportunities for the Gulf States?

The extent to which the Gulf states would be willing to lend further support to the United States in the post-Afghanistan episode would depend on their national interests and priorities. Riyadh in particular will remain cautious about involvement in Afghanistan and is likely to maintain its distance from Taliban 2.0. This is in marked contrast to its historical role in nurturing the Islamic resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and Riyadh's subsequent support for Taliban 1.0 — until Al Qaida's escalating terror campaign made its way into the kingdom in the 2000s, which made Riyadh wary of the Taliban's association with the terrorist group. Today, with the fervent social liberalisation drive led by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who also champions a

Nangarhar, and Paktiya. He estimated that 400 to 600 fighters were dwelling in Afghanistan prior to the US withdrawal.

²¹ Masoud Andarabi, "A Conversation with the Former Minister of the Interior", in *Losing Afghanistan: The Fall of Kabul and the End of Western Intervention*, ed. Brian Brivarti (MacLehose Press, 2022), p. 84.

“moderate Islam” alongside the kingdom’s efforts to control extremist preachers and money transfers abroad, Saudi Arabia will find association with the Taliban government far from appealing.

“Riyadh will remain cautious about involvement in Afghanistan and is likely to maintain its distance from Taliban 2.0.”

One scenario that could spur Riyadh into taking a more active role in Afghanistan is that involving Iran fishing in troubled waters.²² In such an eventuality, Saudi involvement could include tapping its political and religious leadership to help bring about reconciliation among rival Afghan factions, including those within the Taliban itself, with a view to stabilising the political situation and regaining some influence in the country. Indeed, in 2008 and 2009, Riyadh did mediate two rounds of secret talks between the Taliban and the Karzai government.²³

Dwarfing Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Afghanistan today is the role that Qatar has played as an interlocutor between the United States

²² See Umer Karim, “With Taliban takeover, Gulf States maneuver in Afghanistan”, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), 10 September 2021, <https://agsiw.org/with-taliban-takeover-gulf-states-maneuver-in-afghanistan/>. For more information on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry played out in Afghanistan, see Kristian Berg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, *A Rock between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

²³ Guido Steinberg and Nils Woermer, “Exploring Iran and Saudi Arabia’s Interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers — A Zero Sum Game?”, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, April 2013, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/fachpublikationen/Steinberg_Woermer_SaudiArabia_Interest_April2013.pdf.

and Taliban since the 2013 establishment of a Taliban Political Office in Doha. Besides sponsoring talks over the years, including the one leading to the US-Taliban agreement during the Trump administration, Doha has been a valuable conduit for transmitting messages. Serving as a facilitator during the final stages of evacuation in Kabul, Qatar's Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah Al-Khater told CNN that Qatari support staff were providing technical expertise to coordinate flight operations in and out of the airport — all this took place while negotiating with the Taliban.²⁴ Also, Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani concluded a high-level visit to Kabul in a bid to urge the cooperation of “all Afghan parties in national reconciliation”.²⁵

Doha's ventures in the realm of mediation are, as Mehran Kamrava writes in *Qatar: Small States, Big Politics*, an integral component of its “hyperactive diplomacy”, which include acting as an intermediary between Iran and the United States.²⁶ Doha's efforts have been recognised by its recent designation as a US major non-NATO ally,²⁷ effectively upgrading the Doha-Washington partnership, while a Taliban

²⁴ See CNN News, “Qatar plays key role in dealing with Taliban”, 4 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3OZAdJq4fk&ab_channel=CNN.

²⁵ Reuters, “Qatar's foreign minister visits premier of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan”, 13 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatari-foreign-minister-visits-kabul-al-jazeera-says-2021-09-12/>.

²⁶ Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2013). See also website of Italian Institute for International Studies (ISPI) for a recent collection of remarks by experts weighing in on Doha's diplomacy, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/washington-tehran-dohas-diplomacy-work-33081>.

²⁷ This is an honour bestowed on only two other countries in the Gulf, Kuwait and Bahrain. See Al Jazeera, “US officially designates Qatar as a major non-NATO ally”, 10 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/10/us-officially-designates-qatar-as-a-major-non-nato-ally>.

spokesman acknowledged the benefits of connecting with the international community through its office in Doha.²⁸ But the stakes for Doha remain high should negotiations break down and the Taliban descend into violence. Already the United States has cancelled scheduled talks in Doha with the Taliban after the later reversed its decision to allow girls to attend high school.²⁹

“Dwarfing Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Afghanistan today is the role that Qatar has played as an interlocutor between the United States and Taliban.”

As for the UAE, having provided refuge to ousted Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, it remains well connected with former Afghan government officials, many of whom possess lucrative property investments in Dubai.³⁰ Afghan businesspeople in the UAE have urged the Taliban to allow Afghanistan’s airport management operations to be handled by the UAE, amid ongoing talks that the group is holding with

²⁸ Menatella Ibrahim, “The Taliban say their Doha office helps with connecting internationally”, *Doha News*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.dohanews.co/the-taliban-say-their-doha-office-helps-with-connecting-internationally/>.

²⁹ Fatemeh Salari, “US cancels its meeting with the Taliban in Doha”, *Doha News*, 27 March 2022, <https://www.dohanews.co/qatar-fm-expresses-shock-over-talibans-closure-of-girls-schools/>.

³⁰ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “The Afghan Officials’ Families with Luxury Pads in Dubai”, 4 November 2019, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-11-04/the-afghan-officials-families-with-luxury-pads-in-dubai>.

Qatar and Turkey.³¹ Beyond these commercial ties, however, Afghanistan holds little strategic relevance for Abu Dhabi.³²

Rightsizing, Wrong Signals

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan represents a subset of the recalibration of the US military posture in the Middle East — portrayed in the Biden administration’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* of March 2021 as “rightsizing” but perceived as a retreat by US partners in the Gulf. The *Global Posture Review* announced in November 2021 merely stated “additional analysis” was needed to assess US requirements in the Middle East.³³ The United States’ growing focus on the Indo-Pacific and strategic competition with China — expressed particularly through the Biden administration’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy* report of February 2021 — would have added to the sense that the Gulf states had been relegated to the side-lines. Yet, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the unclassified media statement unveiling the 2022 US National Defense Strategy acknowledged the critical importance of working with the United States’ allies and partners in developing an “integrated deterrence” against threats from China and Russia.³⁴

³¹ Tamim Shaheer, “Kabul airport contract ‘should be given to the UAE’”, *Tolo News*, 27 December 2021, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176046>.

³² Karim, “Gulf states maneuver”.

³³ See Jim Garamone, “Biden approves global posture review recommendations”, US Department of Defense, 29 November 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2856053/biden-approves-global-posture-review-recommendations/>.

³⁴ US Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy”, 28 March 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>

The ongoing debate on “rightsizing” the US military presence in the Gulf revolves around cost reduction and avoiding “costly and lengthy military entanglements that could be more strategically deployed elsewhere”.³⁵ Countering Iran and degrading terror networks remain US priorities, but these objectives do not require a large ground presence.³⁶

“The ongoing debate on ‘rightsizing’ the US military presence in the Gulf revolves around cost reduction and avoiding ‘costly and lengthy military entanglements that could be more strategically deployed elsewhere’.”

Under President Biden, the United States has undertaken some rationalising, such as shifting its prepositioned arms supplies in Qatar to Jordan following the shuttering of its three-decades old Qatar Support Group comprising three installations.³⁷ Despite these adjustments, the US basing network in the Gulf is believed to remain largely intact, with

³⁵ Ilan Goldenberg et al., “When Less Is More: Rethinking US Military Strategy and Posture in the Middle East”, Center for a New American Security, 4 November 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/when-less-is-more>.

³⁶ General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., “Posture Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee”, US Central Command, 15 March 2022, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.

³⁷ J. P. Lawrence, “US military shifts army basing from Qatar to Jordan in move that could provide leverage against Iran”, *Stars and Stripes*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2021-07-01/us-military-closes-qatar-camps-in-move-that-could-play-into-iran-policy-2009140.html>; Neil McCabe, “Curtain falls on ASG-Qatar after three decades supporting readiness, resilience”, US Army Central, 24 June 2021, <https://www.usarcent.army.mil/News/Article/2678775/curtain-falls-on-asg-qatar-after-three-decades-supporting-readiness-resilience/>.

analysts noting that the chess pieces have yet to be moved.³⁸ Indeed, Brett McGurk, the White House Middle East coordinator, declared at the Manama Dialogue in November 2021, that the “US is not going anywhere”.³⁹

Nevertheless, words are not always matched by deeds. Taking the example of Saudi Arabia, the US withdrawal of eight Patriot antimissile batteries, a THAAD antiballistic missile system and fighter jets from the country in July 2021⁴⁰ evidently left the Saudis feeling vulnerable to drone and missile attacks by Iran and the Iran-allied Houthis of Yemen.⁴¹ However, soon after yet another drone and missile attack on Saudi oil facilities on 20 March, an unidentified senior US official reportedly revealed that the United States had supplied the

³⁸ For a broad overview of the US global military presence, see <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive>. Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, argues that the United States can no longer afford to “garrison the globe” with 750 bases in 80 countries. See <https://www.cato.org/commentary/750-bases-80-countries-too-many-any-nation-time-us-bring-its-troops-home>.

³⁹ Mina Aldroubi, “US will ‘stay in Middle East to counter Iranian threats’”, *The National*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2021/11/21/us-will-stay-in-middle-east-to-counter-iranian-threats/>.

⁴⁰ Gordon Lubold, Nancy A. Youssef and Michael R. Gordon, “US military to withdraw hundreds of troops, aircraft, antimissile batteries from Middle East”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-to-withdraw-hundreds-of-troops-aircraft-antimissile-batteries-from-middle-east-11624045575>.

⁴¹ Jon Gambrell, “US pulls missile defenses in Saudi Arabia amid Yemen attacks”, AP News, 11 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-asia-afghanistan-dubai-middle-east-b6aaf30d689d0a8e45901e51f0457381>. Two of the withdrawn Patriots and the THAAD had been deployed to Saudi Arabia, along with 200 US support personnel, in 2019 after the country’s oil facilities came under drone and missile attacks. See Amanda Macais, “Pentagon to deploy Patriot missile system to Saudi Arabia after Iran oil attacks”, CNBC, 26 September 2019, <https://www.cnbcm.com/2019/09/26/patriot-missile-system-to-saudi-arabia-after-iran-oil-attacks.html>

kingdom with a number of Patriots in the preceding weeks.⁴² Extrapolating from this example, it would seem that Washington's approach, at least as far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, is to minimise the US footprint in the country while supporting the kingdom in strengthening its own defences, an approach that may not necessarily be reassuring for US partners in the Gulf.

“The reality is that even a *perceived* US exit has forced the Gulf states to rethink their contingency plans.”

While the reconfiguration of US military resources may be necessary, the United States has to emphasise to its partners that it possesses “lift and communications systems which allow it to have an Army designed primarily to fight in another hemisphere”, as argued by Des Roches of the US National Defense University.⁴³

According to Kirsten Fontenrose, a US exit will force regional partners to “review their risk assessment [...] and remain open to alternative powers”.⁴⁴ The reality is that even a *perceived* US exit has forced the Gulf states to rethink their contingency plans. One positive

⁴² Ellen Mitchell, “US transfers Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia”, *The Hill*, 21 March 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/599065-us-transfers-patriot-missiles-to-saudi-arabia/>

⁴³ Personal correspondence with author, 4 February 2022.

⁴⁴ See recording of “After Afghanistan, does the US need bases in the Middle East at all?,” hosted by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 21 September 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/event/after-afghanistan-does-the-u-s-need-bases-in-the-middle-east-at-all/>.

outcome probably is the Gulf countries' efforts to build their own defensive capabilities.

Shifting Geopolitical Dynamics

Force restructuring aside, the actions and words of President Biden with regard to Saudi Arabia are hardly reassuring of US reliability and they now seem to have a ripple effect in the Gulf. The signals of a relationship downgrade were evident when Biden described the kingdom as a “pariah” state during his presidential campaign.⁴⁵ Later, he promised a harder line on Riyadh following the release of a report on the Jamal Khashoggi murder, while preferring a “counterpart-to-counterpart” engagement, effectively snubbing Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who was implicated in the murder.⁴⁶ This approach is in contrast to that adopted by the Trump administration, which, despite the president's often erratic style, on balance showed a transactional relationship with the kingdom.

The mistrust between the United States and the Gulf states, coupled with the lack of security guarantees, has prompted the monarchies to engage in hedging by pursuing friendly relationships with regional rivals — and at times with US adversaries. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have begun talks with their regional rival Iran, signalling

⁴⁵ David Sanger, “Candidate Biden called Saudi Arabia a ‘pariah’: He now has to deal with it”, *New York Times*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/24/us/politics/biden-jamal-khashoggi-saudi-arabia.html>.

⁴⁶ Natasha Turak, “Biden's snub of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is a ‘warning’ signaling a relationship downgrade”, CNBC, 17 February 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/17/bidens-snub-of-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-is-a-warning.html>.

that beyond the horse-trading between Washington and Tehran on reviving the Iran nuclear deal, the Gulf states are ready to take matters into their own hands to secure their respective strategic interests.⁴⁷

“The mistrust between the United States and the Gulf states, coupled with the lack of security guarantees, has prompted the monarchies to engage in hedging by pursuing friendly relationships with regional rivals — and at times with US adversaries.”

More recently, in early March, the UAE received Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, a visit over which the United States said it was “profoundly disappointed and troubled”.⁴⁸ Although normalisation with Assad was already in progress since the Emirati foreign minister’s trip to Damascus in November 2021, the fact that the UAE allowed a Russian ally to visit the country amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an indication of its growing frustration with Washington. For his part, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, indicated his own frustration with the Biden administration by sending an indirect but blunt message to the US president in a recent interview with *The Atlantic*. In the words of the interviewer, the Saudi royal said if his best efforts at running his country were not good enough for Biden, then “the

⁴⁷ See also Hussein Ibish, “Saudi Arabia’s new dialogue with Iran was long in the making”, AGSIW, 4 May 2021, <https://agsiw.org/saudi-arabias-new-dialogue-with-iran-was-long-in-the-making/>.

⁴⁸ Sarakshi Rai, “US says it’s ‘profoundly disappointed’ after Syria’s Assad visits UAE”, *The Hill*, 20 March 2022.

consequences of running a moralistic foreign policy would be the [US] president's to discover".⁴⁹

“It was the discovery of a secret Chinese military facility in the UAE that raised alarm bells in Washington.”

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also signed military cooperation agreements with Russia⁵⁰ and have procured military hardware both from Russia⁵¹ and China.⁵² Arms purchases have gone on for a few years but it was the discovery of a secret Chinese military facility in the UAE last November that raised alarm bells in Washington.⁵³

⁴⁹ Graeme Wood, “Absolute Power”, *The Atlantic*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/>.

⁵⁰ See Robert Mason, “Saudi-Russian Military Cooperation: Signaling or Strategy?”, AGSIW, 3 September 2021, <https://agsiw.org/saudi-russian-military-cooperation-signaling-or-strategy/>; and Ismael Naar, “Saudi Arabia, Russia sign deal to develop joint military cooperation”, *Al Arabiya*, 24 August 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/08/24/Saudi-Arabia-Russia-sign-deal-to-develop-joint-military-cooperation>.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Military Watch, “The new checkmate stealth jet is the result of a Russia-UAE joint fighter program”, 22 July 2021, <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/sukhoi-light-stealth-jet-russia-uae-joint-program-report>.

⁵² Bradley Bowman, Jared Thompson and Ryan Brobst, “China’s Surprising Drone Sales in the Middle East”, *Defense News*, 23 April 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2021/04/23/chinas-surprising-drone-sales-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁵³ Gordon Lubold and Warren Strobel, “Secret Chinese port project in Persian Gulf rattles US relations with UAE”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>.

Diplomatic Reset and Security Guarantees Needed

The challenge today for US-Gulf relations is unclogging the mutual mistrust through a reset.⁵⁴ The perceived lack of reciprocity in US-Gulf relations and of US commitment to the region will complicate matters when Washington needs its Gulf partners. The ghosts of Afghanistan and now the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war will remind Washington that it cannot afford to marginalise its partners and allies, Gulf-based or elsewhere. From crisis evacuation to managing global oil prices and re-routing energy resources, the monarchies do have their usefulness.

The energy security of Europe and the world, as a result of events in the Russia-Ukraine crisis, hinges on the roles of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. While Washington is today less dependent on Middle Eastern oil, it has been affected by the spike in global oil prices following the Russian invasion. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, key players in the global energy market, have so far resisted US pressures to curb price increases through increased oil production. Given the value they place on Russia's support in maintaining oil production and prices, and possibly their growing military cooperation with Russia, the two Gulf states have also so far been nonchalant about intervening in a war outside of their orbit. Abu Dhabi initially chose to abstain from voting on the UN Security Council resolution to condemn the Russia invasion, a position influenced by its desire to secure Russian support for its own UN resolution relating to the Houthis of Yemen. Nevertheless, with subsequent US pressure, the UAE and Saudi Arabia joined the global consensus against the invasion, but the sequence of events shows that

⁵⁴ See David Gardner, "Mistrust between the US and the Gulf underscores the need to reset relations", *Financial Times*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/7bba37b9-a18a-4ca4-b139-9b26a6fded26>.

strategic diversification of partnerships remains key in their policy directions.⁵⁵

“From crisis evacuation to managing global oil prices and re-routing energy resources, the monarchies do have their usefulness.”

The Gulf states could also fill Moscow’s role as supplier of oil and gas to Europe in future, with the latter expected to turn its back on oil and gas supplies from Russia. But this would not be possible without US security guarantees to ensure the freedom of movement for maritime trade purposes. With failed states looming in the region and constant threats from Iran, Iraq, and perhaps Afghanistan in the near future, the Gulf states would need assurances of US reliability — or they might look elsewhere.

Amid concerns about a possible regrouping of Al Qaida and the US Defense Department's assessment that IS-K “could establish an external attack capability against the United States and our allies in twelve to eighteen months, but possibly sooner if the group experiences unanticipated gains in Afghanistan”,⁵⁶ the United States must seriously consider the support role that its facilities in the Gulf countries could play, now that it has exited Afghanistan.

⁵⁵ See Hussein Ibish, “Why US pressure was needed to get Israel and Gulf States to condemn Russia”, AGSIW, 4 March 2022, <https://agsiw.org/why-u-s-pressure-was-needed-to-get-israel-and-gulf-states-to-condemn-russia/>.

⁵⁶ General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., “Posture Statement”.

David Cohen, the deputy director of the CIA, spoke to *The New York Times* about the importance of “collecting intelligence from afar”, what is known as “over-the-horizon operations”, to track the terrorist threat arising from both Al Qaeda and IS-K.⁵⁷ The commander of the US Central Command noted in March that the Central Asian countries, which apart from Pakistan and US aircraft carriers in the Gulf, are possible launching sites for over-the-horizon operations, were “measured” in their support for US counterterrorism operations owing to Russian pressure.⁵⁸ Stacie Pettyjohn, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, argues that existing US bases in the Gulf would offer an “effective and economical way” of conducting such operations to weaken terrorist groups in Afghanistan. “Over-the-horizon

“Existing US bases in the Gulf would offer an ‘effective and economical way’ of conducting such operations to weaken terrorist groups in Afghanistan.”

operations” would primarily involve drones, which can stay airborne without refuelling on long transit flights from Qatar or the UAE, allowing for the collection of intelligence on suspected terrorist activity in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ As Geoffrey Gresh of the National Defense University

⁵⁷ Julian Barnes, “Al Qaeda could rebuild in Afghanistan in a year or two, U.S. officials say”, *The New York Times*, 28 September 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/14/us/politics/al-qaeda-afghanistan.html>.

⁵⁸ General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., “Posture Statement”.

⁵⁹ Stacie Pettyjohn, “Over-the-horizon does not have to mean next door”, *Lanfare*, 7 November 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/over-horizon-does-not-have-mean-next-door>.

argues, when “external security concerns outweigh perceptions of internal security”, a Gulf Arab host nation is more likely to maintain a US military basing presence.⁶⁰ ❖

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⁶⁰ Geoffrey Gresh, *Gulf Security and the US Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford University Press), pp. 2–5.



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