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KRISTIAN COATES-ULRICHSEN (ED.)

THE CHANGING SECURITY DYNAMICS OF THE PERSIAN GULF

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OF THE PERSIAN GULF

KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN
(*Editor*)

The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf

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INTRODUCTION

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

The political and economic upheaval triggered by the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings of 2011 has underscored the vulnerability of states across the Middle East and North Africa to the intersection of domestic pressures and external shocks. The initial phase of the uprisings has given way to a series of messy and uncertain transitions that has ignited violence both within and across states and left societies deeply fractured. Although the bulk of the protests occurred outside the Persian Gulf, with the notable exception of Bahrain and the partial exception of Kuwait, Persian Gulf states were at the forefront of the political, economic, and security response across the region. The greater role of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, in particular, is consistent with broader changes to the architecture of world politics in which contemporary power and influence are increasingly diffused and distributed among a far wider variety of often-competing state and non-state actors. And yet, the dramatic decline in world oil prices since June 2014 has heightened fiscal stresses in all Persian Gulf economies and called into question the redistributive political economies that have, in part, underpinned sociopolitical stability over the past four decades. Moreover, the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen that started in

March 2015 demonstrated nothing less than the militarisation of GCC defence policy and a direct escalation of the regional struggle with Iran, hitherto carried out largely through proxy actors in local battlegrounds.

The contradictory trends of the volatile 'post-Arab Spring' landscape form both the backdrop to and the focus of this volume on the changing security dynamics of the Persian Gulf, defined as the six GCC states plus Iraq and Iran. The Persian Gulf has long been a zone of instability as the region experienced three major interstate conflicts between 1980 and 2003 and the subsequent civil conflict in Iraq, as well as two prolonged diplomatic crises between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2014 and 2017. While the legacies of the Iran–Iraq War (September 1980–August 1988) and the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (August 1990–February 1991) were relatively contained, the same is not true of the US-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq (March 2003 onward). The chaotic aftermath of the eight-year occupation of Iraq had a lasting impact on regional security structures as it altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, empowered non-state actors in Iraq, and deepened internal fissures along ethnic and sectarian fault-lines across the wider region. One of the greatest changes in Persian Gulf security dynamics since 2003 has been the shift from interstate war towards violent conflict within states driven primarily by non-state groups that nevertheless operate in a rigorously transnational sphere.

Iran constituted another recurring flashpoint of regional and international tensions for much of the same period as the three interstate Persian Gulf wars. The clerical leadership in Iran consolidated political control following the revolution that toppled the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in January 1979, and was seen as a particular threat to security both by the Gulf Arab monarchies and the United States. Gulf Arab states viewed with alarm the initial attempts by elements in Iran to 'export' their revolutionary zeal to neighbouring states and suspected successive post-revolutionary Iran of 'meddling' in regional conflicts through the support of non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. For two generations of US policymakers, the memories of the 444-day hostage crisis between November 1979 and January 1981 have coloured American perceptions of Iran. In much the same way, Iranian perspectives of US policy are often seen through the prism of the 1953 'coup' that removed the Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and reinstated the Shah.¹ Mutual tensions converged in the decade-long nuclear crisis that began with opposition allegations of a clandestine Iranian nuclear programme and

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peaked during the presidencies of George W. Bush (2001–09) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13).

Further from the Persian Gulf, the radicalisation of sizeable elements of the Arab Spring protest movements added a further layer of instability and insecurity, most notably in the spiralling civil wars in Libya and Syria after 2011. Both conflicts drew in a multitude of regional actors, state and non-state alike, and evolved into complex proxy wars between ‘secular’ and Islamist factions in Libya and among a plethora of Gulf Arab and Iranian-backed groups in Syria. The conflicts in Syria and Libya ramified across large swathes of the Middle East and North Africa, greatly increased sectarian violence in post-occupation Iraq, and contributed to a wider geopolitical picture of deep division and protracted levels of intercommunal violence. The United States and the European Union arguably intervened too hastily in Libya and too slowly in Syria as the shadow of Iraq loomed large over policymakers. As a previous collection of essays published by the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University in Qatar put it in 2014, ‘the final chapter of the Arab Spring has yet to be written.’²

New sources of insecurity: national, regional, international

Three unrelated developments since mid-2014 nevertheless have redirected the forces of change and upheaval in dangerously destabilising new ways and each injects potent new sources of uncertainty into national, regional, and international security structures. The first is the startling rise to prominence and power of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which culminated in the defeat of al-Qaeda’s affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, in a series of battles for control of the Syria–Iraq border region in late 2013 and early 2014 and the rapid occupation of large swathes of western and northern Iraqi territory in June 2014. Extensive research into the origins of ISIS by German newspaper *Der Spiegel* has traced the organisation’s roots to the Sunni insurgency that followed the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003.³ Members of ISIS themselves have recounted how many of the group’s eventual leadership first met while in US detention at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq in 2004. Their number included Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the emir of ISIS, who had been arrested by US forces in Falluja in February 2004 after establishing one of the many militant groups that composed the escalating Sunni revolt against the US presence in Iraq.⁴ Meanwhile, domestic developments in Iran (since June 2013) and in Saudi Arabia (since January 2015) have underscored the rapidity of change in

the regional and international posture of both states, as a 'post-Ahmadinejad' Iran re-engaged with world powers and Saudi Arabia under King Salman developed a far more assertive—but unpredictable and even volatile—set of foreign policies.

It was against this backdrop of greater volatility in regional security structures that GCC states became more visible and proactive participants in regional and international politics during the 2000s and early 2010s. Led by Qatar, the UAE, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, the emergence of GCC states as regional powers with a growing international reach predated the Arab Spring but accelerated and acquired a potent new dimension once the initial shock of the upheaval had subsided. GCC states took the lead in responding to the political and economic challenges triggered by the Arab Spring. The scope and scale of Persian Gulf states' assistance to Egypt have provided a clear example of the practical and policy implications of this process in action, as first Qatar and latterly Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed different sides in the post-Mubarak maelstrom of Egyptian politics. The Egyptian example also has illustrated how Gulf states are not impartial actors that do not take sides in choosing how and to whom to provide aid. Policies instead have been indelibly linked to particular political currents rather than being tied to outcomes such as reforms of governance or improvements in transparency.

Over the four years since 2011, the GCC states therefore aligned their growing capabilities (in the political, economic, and security arenas) with a far more expansive policy intent, with the intensification of military operations in Yemen since 2015 being the most visible manifestation of the muscular new approach to regional security. Engaging with an assertive and interventionist GCC across the Middle East and North Africa has become a feature of the regional landscape and caused periodic friction with the United States as President Barack Obama's administration engaged in the most high-level and comprehensive negotiations with Iran since the 1979 revolution. The combination of Iran's ongoing international rehabilitation and the outbreak of the GCC-led conflict in Yemen in 2015, coupled with the sharp drop in international oil prices, reinforces the notion that regional stability and security in the Persian Gulf are in a state of considerable uncertainty.

The second source of uncertainty—which, like the threat from ISIS, also dates from mid-2014—is the accelerated urgency of far-reaching economic and subsidy reform as Persian Gulf economies were hit hard by the collapse and sustained low level of oil prices. Although all six of the GCC states and Iran have made significant attempts to diversify their economies over the past two

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decades with varying degrees of success, they remain heavily reliant, both directly and indirectly, upon revenues from oil and, in Qatar's case, gas. In most cases, oil revenues account for between 80 and 90% of total government revenues, and from 24% of total GDP in Bahrain and 30% in the UAE, to 36 and 38% in Qatar and Oman, 46% in Saudi Arabia, and 56.6% in Kuwait in 2014.⁵ In the one exception, Dubai, where oil accounts for about 5% of GDP, the emirate suffered the indignity of being 'bailed out' by its oil-rich neighbouring emirate, Abu Dhabi, with US\$20 billion in 2009 after the bursting of the speculative real estate bubble and the drying up of easy credit precipitated a short but very sharp debt crisis.⁶

As a result, total government revenues still correlate closely with oil revenues, leaving GCC economies highly vulnerable to external shocks and sources of volatility in international oil markets, over which they have little control. Government revenues in Oman thus fell by 35.9% in the first nine months of 2015 on the back of a 45.5% decline in oil revenues (although spending itself only contracted by 1.8%),⁷ while in Qatar the value of hydrocarbon exports plunged 40.5% year-on-year between July 2014 and July 2015.⁸ Kuwait, meanwhile, recorded a 45.2% year-on-year fall in government revenues for the first eight months of the 2015–16 fiscal year and a near-identical 46.1% drop in oil revenues over the same period.⁹ Saudi oil income fell by 23% in 2015 just as government spending rose at the start of the year after King Salman took the throne and major combat operations commenced in Yemen, contributing to the record \$98 billion budget deficit for the year.¹⁰

The challenge for Gulf officials is how to reformulate a ruling 'bargain' that has broadly underpinned sociopolitical stability for decades but no longer appears economically sustainable. Until 2014, the prevailing hope in the region was that this 'moment of truth' was more of a medium-range issue than an urgent short-term one, and that politically sensitive reductions in current spending could be avoided or minimised by cutbacks in capital expenditures instead. Moreover, the regional political upheaval of the previous five years illustrated how the instinctive response of many GCC governments was to intensify populist short-term measures intended to blunt or pre-empt the social and economic roots of potential or actual political tension. Total state spending in the six GCC states rose by 20 per cent in 2011 as governments responded to the outbreak of the Arab Spring with welfare packages and other benefits.¹¹

Such policies succeeded in preserving political structures and domestic stability (for the most part) in 2011, but had the unintended consequence, as political economist Steffen Hertog has noted, of creating 'a ratchet effect that

demands ever larger outlays during every political crisis' because 'expectations are easy to raise but difficult to curb'.¹² The measures taken in 2011 to blunt the impact of the wider political unrest were overwhelmingly short-term in nature and encompassed cash handouts (Bahrain and Kuwait), creating thousands of additional new jobs in already saturated public sectors (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman), and raising workers' wages and benefits (Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). And yet, the packages also created a contagious expectation from many citizens in GCC states of additional government largesse, as demonstrated in January 2011 when, shortly after Kuwait's Emir announced the Gulf's first handout worth \$4 billion, Qatari nationals demanded that their own government follow suit. Despite the fact that Qatar has the highest per capita GDP in the world, a local English-language newspaper in Doha, *The Peninsula*, reported that the announcement 'has led to huge excitement in the Qatari community', with many Qataris suggesting publicly that their government 'should announce a similar or even more attractive "gift package" for its people'.¹³

One of the few direct and, as a result, most contentious policy responses to target all Persian Gulf residents, whether national or expatriate, has been the launching of long overdue reform of subsidy programmes, which—in energy alone—were estimated to have cost Saudi Arabia \$107 billion in 2015.¹⁴ At the time of writing, all GCC states except Kuwait have taken action to scale back fuel subsidies, with the UAE being the first to do so in August 2015. Prices for gasoline have risen by as much as 100% in Saudi Arabia, 57% in Bahrain, 33% in Qatar, and 20% in Oman since 2015, while those for diesel have gone up by 200% in Saudi Arabia, 106% in Kuwait, 52% in Qatar, and 31% in Bahrain, albeit from very low starting points.¹⁵ Bahrain also removed subsidies on meat prices, expressed its intent to phase out power and water subsidies, and raised industrial gas use prices, as has Oman.¹⁶ Elsewhere, water bills in Saudi Arabia surged by up to 2,000% in some cases following the introduction of new rates in December 2015, prompting a parallel surge in complaints to the country's consultative Shura Council and the sacking of the Minister of Electricity and Water in April 2016 for the 'unsatisfactory' implementation of the tariffs.¹⁷

In Iran, a shake-up of fuel subsidies took place earlier than in GCC states and was announced in 2010 as part of the Five-Year Development Plan for 2010–15. Although the plan initially was hailed for its boldness in tackling subsidy reform head-on, subsequent implementation was hampered by poor data availability, lack of widespread political backing, and a tripling in the

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price of gasoline and basic food items, which perversely increased (rather than decreased) low-income families' dependence on government handouts, in the form of the direct cash payments that had been introduced in 2010 to offset the impact of the lifting of fuel subsidies.¹⁸ As a result, the government of President Hassan Rouhani has struggled to move to the second phase of the reforms, which would invest the surplus generated by the lifting of fuel subsidies into job creation schemes, the health care sector, and public transportation, and, as Iran approached a presidential election in 2017, he found little political support for scaling back the cash payments introduced by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2010, even in the face of rapidly rising fiscal pressures.¹⁹

And yet, Moody's has forecast that the spate of fuel price rises will only lead to savings equivalent to about 1 per cent of GDP and, as such, will do little more than dent the overall size of the fiscal deficits facing the GCC states.²⁰ The broader political sensitivity of tampering with one of the key mechanisms of wealth redistribution from the state to its citizenry has been evident most strongly in Kuwait and Bahrain, the two GCC states with the most vocal and activist parliamentary bodies. Bahrain softened the blow of the meat price increases by compensating citizens for the additional costs, while in Kuwait lawmakers amended a government proposal that would have included Kuwaiti citizens in planned increases to water and electricity charges so that they would apply only to residents of apartment buildings (which are overwhelmingly populated by expatriates) as well as corporate users.²¹ Later in 2016, the Kuwaiti government resigned and the Emir called early elections, which resulted in the return of the political opposition en masse to the National Assembly, rather than confront parliamentarians directly over fuel subsidy reform.²²

It will not be easy for officials in any Persian Gulf state to make further and deeper cuts that really begin to impact on citizens rather than expatriates or corporations, but sooner or later nationals will inevitably start to feel the pain if governments are to make credible inroads into economic reform. The sacking of the Saudi Minister of Electricity and Water was thus a warning of the political pitfalls that lie ahead for the policymakers entrusted with pushing through unpopular decisions. What evidence that does exist suggests that subsidy reform remains a highly sensitive issue that could rapidly become politicised if it is mishandled or if it is seen to progress too far too fast. In its annual survey of youth opinion across the Arab world, Dubai-based ASDA's Burson-Marsteller found that 93 per cent of respondents in Bahrain, 92 per cent in Oman and Qatar, and 86 per cent in Saudi Arabia were in

favour of continuing subsidies.²³ That same month (April 2016), a survey in Kuwait illustrated the strength of attachment to the notion of the government as provider of both welfare and employment for its citizenry, as government statistics showed that fully 58 per cent of unemployed Kuwaitis preferred to remain jobless and wait for a government position to open up rather than take a job in the private sector.²⁴

Officials in Persian Gulf states additionally remain mindful that previous attempts in other regional states to scale back subsidies and raise prices of basic utilities and foodstuffs have provoked violent backlashes in numerous instances. In July 2005, dozens were killed and hundreds injured in disturbances across Yemen that mobilised more than 100,000 people against government plans to reduce fuel subsidies and increase the price of benzene by 86 per cent and diesel by 165 per cent.²⁵ Seven years later, an increase in gasoline prices in Jordan sparked days of rioting and labour strikes throughout the country, notwithstanding even the addition of a compensation package that would have provided poorer households with a \$100 credit per person per year.²⁶ Going further back in time, reductions in food subsidies caused widespread unrest in Egypt in 1977 (when protesters mocked President Anwar Sadat with slogans such as ‘Wain al-futur, ya batal al-‘ubur?’ (‘Hero of the crossing, where’s our breakfast?’)), Morocco in 1981, Tunisia in 1984, and Algeria in 1988.²⁷ These lessons from the past will form an inevitable backdrop to policy formulation as the assertive new leadership of Saudi Arabia, led by the youthful Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud, attempts to transform economic—but not political—structures through Saudi Vision 2030, and rulers of other states attempt to wean their populations away from the redistributive mechanisms of wealth that have underpinned regional political economies since the 1970s.

While the rise of ISIS represents a regional form of insecurity and the challenge of low oil prices a domestic challenge, the third source of volatility is the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, committed to a vague and undefined ‘America First’ approach to international affairs. Trump’s unexpected victory in the electoral college, after Hillary Clinton won nearly three million more votes in the November 2016 election, presented US allies, partners, and foes alike with a dramatic turning point in US domestic and foreign policy priorities, due in part to the incoherence of President Trump’s messaging during the long presidential campaign and the volatility of his early weeks and months in office. While officials in GCC states were glad to see the back of the Obama administration and welcomed Trump’s initial opposition to the

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Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed by the Obama administration and other world powers in 2015, the tenets of US policymaking towards the Persian Gulf were far from clear as this volume went to press in 2017.

Irrespective of any policy responses to specific issues that may arise during the Trump presidency, the arrival of an unpredictable and aggressively populist president in the White House inevitably calls into question the role of the United States in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Although rulers in GCC states expressed great anger at an interview given by President Barack Obama in April 2016 which appeared to refer disparagingly to Persian Gulf leaders as 'free riders', President Trump has expressed his own opposition to free riding in characteristically blunter terms. For the first time since the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine in 1980, which signalled the centrality of the Persian Gulf to US national security, the willingness of the US government to underwrite most of the costs of that security architecture is in doubt. Moreover, emotive issues such as the so-called Muslim ban called for by Trump as candidate and enacted by him in part as President, risk giving succour to radical extremist groups such as ISIS and damaging by association traditional US political and security partners in the GCC. Certainly, the reckless and inflammatory language used by President Trump in his Tweets in support of the Saudi and Emirati actions against Qatar in June 2017 offered an early indication of the unpredictability likely to dominate US policy toward the region during his presidency, while the gap that opened up between the White House and the State Department/Pentagon hinted at the inconsistency in approach across different parts of the US government.

It is this state of flux, in which all the different 'parts' (state and non-state alike) are moving simultaneously, that forms the context of this volume of essays, which examine in depth how regional notions of what security is and to whom it is applied have evolved. As the conduct of foreign and security policies has become increasingly proactive, rather than reactive, among the GCC states, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain heavily involved in a thinly disguised proxy war directed against perceived Iranian 'meddling' in Yemen, understanding the motivations and objectives behind policymaking on both shores of the Persian Gulf has never been more urgent or timely. Moreover, the intensely transnational nature of the threats to regional and international security posed by organisations such as ISIS has placed the GCC states and Iraq in the cross hairs of the global response and sharpened the policy dilemmas facing officials who seek to balance domestic considerations against international pressure to take firm and resolute action. Finally, Iran's

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re-emergence into the international community adds a further set of uncertainties as internal struggles between advocates of a 'moderate' and 'hardline' approach to politics remain unresolved (just as they do in the United States), and European business leaders queue up to make commercial inroads into the largest untapped market in the broader Middle East.

Security in flux

Since the 1980s, the concept of 'what security is' has undergone a transformative shift as the end of the Cold War led to a scholarly widening and deepening of security studies, which moved the discipline far beyond a 'traditional' military and state-centric focus. This occurred simultaneously with the great acceleration of the processes of globalisation, which themselves injected powerful new dimensions into international security studies.²⁸ Globalising flows, in particular, created 'an interpenetration of foreign and domestic ("intermesitic") issues such that national governments increasingly operate in spaces defined by the intersection of internal and external security'.²⁹ Globalisation also contributed to an increase both in the scale and the velocity of risk as threats and challenges to security—such as global terrorism—crossed national boundaries at ever-greater speed. Mary Kaldor and Joseph Stiglitz noted, for example, that attempts to deprive international terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda 'of a homeland in one country does little good' as 'it quickly shifts its base of operations elsewhere'.³⁰

As part of the deepening and widening of security studies, a constructivist approach to international relations has gained ground over the past two decades. This studies the role of beliefs and norms as social constructs that shape approaches to questions of power and security. Constructivism emphasises the importance of local agency in exploring the factors that motivate policymakers to reach and implement the decisions they take. Analysing 'how people act' addresses one of the central deficiencies of the broader international relations literature, namely a neglect of the human dimension in contemporary world politics.³¹ Constructivist approaches ascribe value to the location and distribution of nodes of power within society as well as the relationships between knowledge, power, and interests. The evolution of a position of 'national interest' on any one issue thus represents the outcome of an intersubjective process that combines ideational and material factors and is fluid rather than fixed over time.³²

Distinguishing between security as discourse and security as material threat also enhances the study of 'securitisation'. This refers to the processes by which

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issues become constructed as threats to security, and by whom and for what reason. If an issue is successfully securitised, and accepted as such by the relevant audience, the principal actor feels empowered to take extraordinary measures to combat it. These exceed the rules-based systems that otherwise regulate the conduct of normal behaviour, and demonstrate the importance of agency in defining and shaping responses to particular issues.³³ At a macro-level, the global 'war on terror' represented a successful example of securitisation. It enabled the United States to bypass international norms and structures after 11 September 2001 to combat the perceived threat from al-Qaeda-linked terrorism.³⁴

A closer examination of the processes of securitisation in the Gulf ties the region into the broader world group of developing states, and embeds the study of regional security issues within the realm of comparative politics. This forms part of Keith Krause's identification of a 'security problematic' in contemporary world politics in general, and in the post-Cold War period in particular. This arises out of the fact that perceived threats to security can be ideational as well as material, and can be tied to the survival not of the state but of a particular referent group. In these instances, the idea of security is critical, and the ideational affiliation of the security of the state with the security of its citizens cannot be automatically assumed to be the case.³⁵ In this taxonomy, the internal and external dimensions of security become intertwined as regimes seek security against possible contestation from within their own societies as much as against external aggression from neighbouring states. The Gulf states' external security alignments, both bilaterally with the United States and multilaterally through the creation of the GCC, meet this requirement by reinforcing regime security against internal dissent as well as foreign threats.³⁶

Internationally, the shift in the concept of security began during the Cold War but accelerated sharply following its ending in 1989 and during the period of accelerated globalisation that followed in the 1990s and 2000s, particularly as regional security dynamics in Latin America and Eastern Europe themselves underwent rapid and significant change.³⁷ The reconceptualisation of what security 'is' and 'does' has overseen a broadening and deepening of the global security agenda to encompass new and emerging threats that are increasingly longer-term and non-conventional in nature, and embed the study of security problems firmly within the broader political and socio-economic context of development. Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen have noted how the 'widening and deepening' of international security studies occurred as 'the disappearance of the Cold War had changed both the questions on the security agenda and the actors who could engage them.'³⁸ The widening and

deepening approach to security expanded the security agenda to encompass a wider array of socio-economic and environmental factors and extended the object of reference beyond that of the state.³⁹

The reconceptualisation of security has been intertwined with the great intensification of global interconnectedness and the stretching of power and authority across multiple layers of global governance.⁴⁰ A distinct form of 'global politics' evolved in the 1990s and 2000s which took account of the great acceleration of global interconnections and states' engagement within relentlessly transnational frameworks and issues. The confluence of these trends prompted a major reassessment of the concept of national and global security, and their relationship to each other. Mary Kaldor and Joseph Stiglitz have argued that 'globalization has increased the scale and velocity of risk' and heightened the need for global solutions to problems that routinely cross national boundaries and operate at a multitude of supra- and sub-state levels.⁴¹ And yet, as David Held observes, 'the paradox of our times' is that 'the collective issues we must grapple with are of growing extensity and intensity, yet the means for addressing these are weak and incomplete'.⁴²

At the heart of this collective action problem, in security just as in global governance, is the difficulty of designing policy responses to complex and interconnected challenges that transcend resilient boundaries of national sovereignty. This challenge has been visibly illustrated in the air campaigns launched by the US and selected Western and Middle Eastern allies in 2014 in an attempt to contain the spread of ISIS. The effectiveness of the anti-ISIS measures has been blunted by the fact that the two strands of the air campaign had to work under very different operational environments in Iraq and in Syria against a foe whose territorial authority made no such distinction. The British House of Commons, for example, voted overwhelmingly in September 2014 in favour of participation in the US-led air strikes on ISIS targets in Iraq yet remained aside from the air campaign against ISIS in Syria for lack of parliamentary support for any such engagement, having been defeated on such a motion in August 2013.⁴³ It was only after the deadly terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 changed the political calculus in Britain (as in Europe) that Prime Minister David Cameron felt he had sufficient political support among UK parliamentarians to win a renewed vote for military intervention in Syria, albeit against ISIS rather than the Assad regime, as initially proposed in 2013.⁴⁴

Debates on security in the Persian Gulf have, however, remained heavily dependent on realist and neorealist considerations of the balance of power

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and balance of threat in terms of the actual formulation of domestic and regional security policies both by state officials (on both coasts of the Persian Gulf) and by most observers of Persian Gulf security affairs. Although voluminous, the literature on Persian Gulf security studies (as with foreign policy studies and international relations) has, as Fred Lawson argued forcefully, been ‘framed in terms of concepts and methodologies that lag far behind the times in each field’ and thus have little useful contribution to a scholarly understanding of the actual dynamics of foreign and security policymaking and interstate interaction in the Persian Gulf—that is, how security works in the region in practice.⁴⁵

Balance of threat theory, as developed by Stephen Walt, held that states would determine and modify alliances based on their threat perception from other states, which itself was a function of aggregate strength, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions. Aspects of this are clearly discernible in the Arab Gulf states’ creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in May 1981 as a defensive response to the perceived threats to regional security posed by the Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War. After several years and several failed proposals to form a regional grouping, the GCC suddenly came together in the space of three months between February and May 1981. Emirati political scientist Abdulkhaleq Abdulla has aptly described how ‘such extraordinary speed is practically unheard of in the history of regional integration and is particularly uncharacteristic of the rulers of the six Arab Gulf states whose normal tendency is to procrastinate on a decision with potential ramifications for their sovereignty.’⁴⁶ The GCC formed a part of the balance of power in the Persian Gulf alongside Iraq and Iran in an uneasy triangular relationship that was itself fluid, fragile, unstable, and, in the aftermath of the 2003 occupation of Iraq—which cemented the United States as part of the regional balance of power—artificial.⁴⁷

Balance of power and balance of threat assessments continue to feature high on national and regional security agendas in the Persian Gulf, as evidenced by the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition that intervened militarily in Yemen in March 2015 to prevent the further empowerment of Houthi rebels backed ostensibly (in their view) by Iran. Yet, the enduring dynamic between the Arab Gulf states and Iran illustrates the importance of integrating constructivist approaches to security that focus on narratives and identities in shaping and reshaping policy agendas. As we have already noted, a constructivist approach focuses on the decisions made by policymakers and the envi-

ronment within which they must operate. It locates and identifies the agency in analysing how and why issues become securitised or not and takes security both as a social construct and a material threat, building upon work by scholars such as Alexander Wendt and Richard Price,⁴⁸ who emphasise the importance of beliefs and norms in shaping state behaviour, and of what Christian Reus-Smit has labelled the role of 'human action in contemporary world politics.'⁴⁹ This is particularly important in the case of the Arab Gulf states, in which the conduct of foreign and security affairs is restricted to a tightly drawn circle of senior members of the ruling family and their closest advisers, and in Iraq and Iran, where foreign policy represents the outcome of sets of overlapping political influences.⁵⁰

Scholars of the Persian Gulf thus confront a paradox whereby regional security agendas often follow the remorseless assessment of balance of power considerations even as decision-making structures remain highly personalised and open to intersubjective interpretation. During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13), senior Iranian officials on several occasions made inflammatory remarks about the Arab Gulf states, such as those by Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mohammadi, who in June 2008 referred to the next crisis in the Persian Gulf as being the 'crisis of legitimacy of the monarchies and traditional systems, which considering current circumstances cannot survive'.⁵¹ Seven years later, comments by Saudi Arabia's new Foreign Minister, Adil al-Jubayr, in October 2015 made clear the enduring 'war of words' over perceptions of Iranian activity among Arab Gulf policymakers. Al-Jubayr, who succeeded the veteran Saud al-Faisal Al Saud in April 2015, struck a belligerent tone when he accused Iran of 'meddling' in Syria and Yemen and stated, somewhat hyperbolically, that 'Saudi Arabia and its people are the target of continuous aggression' from Iran.⁵²

With this in mind, it was unsurprising how policymakers in the Arab Gulf states responded to the initial spread of the regional upheaval to GCC states by attributing the protests to external interference rather than as the product of domestic political or socio-economic factors. Initially, they targeted Iran, particularly as the uprising in Bahrain and the demonstrations in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia were largely Shi'a protests. Thus, in April 2011, Bahrain's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, claimed, 'We have never seen such a sustained campaign from Iran on Bahrain and the Gulf as we've seen in the past two months.'⁵³ Five months later, the report on the uprising published by the Bahrain Independent Commission on Inquiry (BICI) found no evidence of any Iranian role in the unrest, despite months of Bahraini government claims to the contrary.⁵⁴

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Studying the dynamics of regional security in the Persian Gulf through the examination of identities and beliefs (both real and perceived) held by key actors therefore casts a light on how officials decide which issues become securitised and subsequently acted upon. The importance of viewing security (and policy) through such a lens was noted in a journal article in 2009 on Iran's nuclear ambitions by Shahram Chubin of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who observed: 'there has been an inflation of the Iranian threat, which is poorly understood and often exaggerated. Depicting Iran as a military threat obscures the real political threat the country poses to its region; Iran's regional behavior has been neglected and overshadowed by the contentious nuclear issue. However, it is precisely Iran's behavior and goals which feed concerns about its nuclear ambitions.'⁵⁵ This is as important in 2017 as it ever has been, as the region is once again host to a number of conflict zones that illustrate the interlinked aspects of local, regional, and international security. The escalation in the Syrian conflict since 2011, the emergence of ISIS in 2013, and the outbreak of the Yemen war in 2015 all thrust contrasting interpretations of regional stability to the forefront of policy responses to the interlinked crises of security in the Persian Gulf. Perception of developments has thus played, and will continue to play, a major role in determining the make-up of security agendas in all Persian Gulf states in a post-Arab Spring era of heightened volatility and greater political uncertainty. Engaging in depth with local and regional debates is vital therefore, both from a scholarly and a policy viewpoint, to understanding the changing dynamics of Persian Gulf security when even the 'facts on the ground' are themselves the subject of acute contestation and geopolitical friction.

Against the backdrop of the new threats to regional security posed by the rise of non-state actors and the post-2011 political and economic upheaval, the election of Hassan Rouhani, a man widely viewed as a 'moderate', as President of Iran greatly altered the course of international and, with it, regional politics. Rouhani's election victory in June 2013 was followed in November by a breakthrough in five secret rounds of dialogue between Iran and the United States, which represented the outcome of Omani efforts in 2012 and 2013 to reduce regional tensions and seek a diplomatic resolution to points of potential conflict.⁵⁶ Months of subsequent negotiations between Iran and the international community (represented by the P5+1 group of states) culminated in a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in July 2015. Under the terms of the JCPOA, Iran agreed to heavy restrictions on its uranium enrichment and intense monitoring and verification of its nuclear programme to preclude any