

مركز البحرين للدراسات الاستراتيجية والدولية والطاقة  
Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies



# **Russian and GCC Perspectives: GCC–Russian Relations After the Iranian Nuclear Deal**

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## 1. Introduction

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iranian nuclear deal, marks an important turning point in the strategic balance of the Middle East area, and the Gulf in particular. The geo-political tumult experienced by the region after the Arab Spring in 2011 is in some sense the culmination of changes in the strategic interests and postures of various players that started after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, most notably an explicitly diminishing role played by the US as it redirects its resources to other regions. Coincidentally or otherwise, Russia's involvement in the region has been expanding, offering the opportunity for the development of relations between Russia and the Gulf countries—relations which have historically been limited in scale.



Russian and GCC commentators are well-acquainted with the Western views regarding the GCC region. However, Russian and GCC commentators are comparatively uninformed about each other's perspectives regarding this important topic due to the nascent nature of research dialogue between the two. This report aims to remedy this communication lacuna by furnishing readers with Russian and GCC perspectives on the issue, delivered by specialists in Gulf strategic issues.

The views expressed below represent the views of the authors, and they do not necessarily represent the views of the institutions to which they are affiliated, or of their respective governments.

## 2. About the Authors



Alexander Aksenok

Dr. Aksenok is a Russian ambassador extraordinary, a plenipotentiary, and a leading researcher at the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies. He is an expert on international relations with a special focus on the MENA region.



Omar Mahmood

Mr. Omar Mahmood is a Research Analyst at the Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat). He is a specialist in Gulf strategic and defense, and geo-political studies.

### 3. A Russian Perspective

Alexandr Aksenonok, Russian Institute of Oriental Studies



Russia's relationship with the Gulf countries is complex, and it responds to internal political transformations on both sides of the relationship, as well as to external developments in world politics.

Despite differences over Syria and the Iranian nuclear deal, contemporary GCC-Russian relations are arguably at an apex, both in terms of shared interests and mutual understanding. Russia believes that the GCC has become a real power center, exerting influence within and beyond the Middle East.

#### Historical Relations

GCC-Russian relations predate the inception of the Gulf bloc. The USSR was one of the first states to recognize, and establish diplomatic relations with, the Saudi Kingdom in 1932. The Soviets viewed the momentum towards integration on the Arabian peninsula positively, especially against the backdrop of the West's colonial policies, which were characterized by dividing and plundering the Arab states. Saudi Arabia appreciates that in those difficult initial years, Moscow provided Riyadh with critical oil products, bizarre as such an import may sound today.

Thereafter, internal issues within the USSR led to a recall of the Russian Ambassador, freezing bilateral relations for a protracted period. During the Cold War, looking through a bipolar lens, the USSR viewed the Gulf states as US satellites, in contrast to the Arab countries that had so called socialist leanings.

Russian-Saudi relations remained complicated during the 1980s due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a Muslim country. In the 1990s, mutual diplomatic representation was re-established, but was overshadowed by a pro-Muslim stance by Saudi Arabia on Chechnya and Kosovar independence, and a Russian position that emphasized territorial integrity and external non-interference. At the same time, Russia's decision to adopt a pro-western foreign policy meant that GCC relations were subsumed within a broader engagement of the west that emphasized Middle Eastern security.



In the early 2000s, Russia began to reformulate its relationship with its Arab partners, including the GCC states, with an emphasis on pragmatic policies, such as encouraging political dialogue and

building economic ties. At the same time, the GCC states were developing and systematizing their own internal strategic priorities. Five rounds of talks between the GCC and Russian foreign ministers were held, covering topics such as international terrorism, political solutions to the crises in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and Russia's ties to Iran, in light of the GCC states' designation of Iran as the main regional threat, especially following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. In addition to its military might, the GCC states expressed concern toward Iran's ability to influence their Shiite communities.

## The Arab Spring and Beyond

The Arab Spring has rendered drafting a Gulf security apparatus a much more complex issue, as previously key players, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, have been impaired by internal strife, sometimes between groups close to Saudi Arabia or Iran. Turkey's growing domestic and external problems have taken the luster away from its model of Islamic democracy.

Compared to the more substantial reforms enacted by Jordan and Morocco, Saudi Arabia underwent gradual economic and political reforms, as it tried to balance the threats posed by terrorism and by Iran, which is considered in the Gulf as a hegemonic state, (though most Western and Russian experts regard Saudi perceptions about the threat posed by Iran to be exaggerated).

Certainly, Iran gained significant influence in Iraq after the US invasion, while it maintains close ties to the Assad regime and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Together with the increased activity of Shia opposition in Bahrain and the Houthis in Yemen (the latter of which have a debatable relationship



with Iran), these developments across the Arabian Peninsula have caused Saudi Arabia to adopt a new, comprehensive strategy as a countermeasure, accelerated by changes at the top of the Saudi power structure.

Saudi-US relations have also changed notably. Riyadh has come to view the US as sometimes being an unreliable ally, as reflected in its failure to back Hosni Mubarak, and as appearing duplicitous, via its flirtation with the Muslim Brotherhood, and its support for policies that have empowered Iran at



Saudi Arabia's expense, such as the US' stance regarding Syria, and its spearheading the Iranian nuclear deal.

Diminishing confidence in the US' willingness to be the regional security guarantor has caused the GCC states to reach out to Russia, both as a diversification strategy, and with the hope that Russia might play a moderating role with respect to Iran. This fitted in well with Russia's efforts to develop ties with all Arab states from the early 2000s, in the pursuit of its political and economic interests.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has been a controversial issue. Its US and GCC opponents believe that it is unlikely to check Tehran's nuclear ambitions, and that it is likely to embolden Iran regionally, as it frees up funds for pro-Iranian regional militia activities, possibly even igniting a nuclear arms race.

Its supporters argue that Iranian moderates will be strengthened within the Iranian power structure, especially the elements that favor more responsible regional policies, pushing Iran into a more constructive relationship with the GCC states. Many JCOPA proponents also believe that the US remains as committed as ever to the security of the GCC states.



GCC-Russian relations have maintained their positive trajectory and pragmatic nature in spite of the JCPOA, setting aside the disagreements over Syria. The region's complexities have thus far prevented any major breakthroughs, the economic cooperation has continued to develop, as well as an understanding that the two sides' shared interests exceed the areas of disagreement, and that sustained dialogue is the best way of

addressing differences of opinion. Both the GCC and Russia regard regional security, the Middle East peace process, the promotion of a dialogue among civilizations, and the fights against terrorism, piracy, and the drug trade as areas where they have shared visions on effective policies.

Among the six GCC members, a notable, multi-faceted relationship has developed between Russia and Bahrain, covering politics, economics, science, culture, and other spheres. It represents the fruits of four visits by HM King Hamad to President Putin.

A major theme of Russia's engagement with the Arab world has been international cooperation against ISIL and other Islamist terrorist organizations which pursue political agendas. The complexity of counterterrorism has predictably generated some misunderstandings regarding Russia's regional strategy, especially in the eyes of various GCC stakeholders.

In particular, there is a perception that Russia prioritizes its relationship with Iran over any relationship with the GCC states. During a recent GCC–Russia dialogue in Moscow, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov addressed these concerns by explaining that a country's right to expand its regional influence has to be exercised in accordance with international law, in good faith, and without interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Russia has also sought to counter rhetoric that enflames intra-Islamic sectarian tensions, calling for unity among Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, due to its relative geographic proximity to Russia, Iran is a natural partner for Russia in a variety of issues, including trade, energy, and security, and is keen for it to enter the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a political alliance comprising non-Western states, which was founded by China and Russia. Accordingly, expecting Russia to dispense with Iran in favor of a stronger relationship with the GCC is unrealistic and illogical.

Yet by the same token, Iran and Russia disagree on various foreign policy issues, such as Russia's insistence that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons, or the long-term vision for the future of Syria, where Russia favors it as a territorially integrated multiethnic, multiconfessional civil state that has good relations with Russia, neither of which is essentially dependent upon the retention of either Assad personally, or of the Alawite ruling minority. In the case of Yemen, Russia's stance has been neutrality, compared to Iran's unequivocal support for Ali Abdulla Salih and the Houthis. Moreover, due to Russia's security cooperation with Israel, it views Iran's reliance upon Hezbollah with suspicion.<sup>2</sup> Many Iranian politicians also oppose the formation of an alliance with Russia, favoring no more than continued partnership.<sup>3</sup>



## Conclusion

Synthesizing the above, it is critical to emphasize that Russia does not support the policy of regional hegemony in the world affairs and particularly in the Gulf region.<sup>4</sup> Given these considerations, it is not realistic to confront Russia with an «either–or choice»: either Iran or the GCC. And though Russia and Iran have many common interests and their cooperation looks promising, their relationship is

<sup>1</sup> Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова, [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/...](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/...)

<sup>2</sup> Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership, Dmitry Trenin, Carnegie Moscow Center, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/08/18/russia-and-iran-historic-mistrust-and-contemporary-part...>

<sup>3</sup> См. Газета RU, 06.03.2016

<sup>4</sup> «Аль-Хаят», 26 февраля 2016 года, <http://www.alhayat.com/m/opinion/14165741>  
[www.alhayat.com/m/opinion/14041679](http://www.alhayat.com/m/opinion/14041679)

not without challenges. Moscow's and Tehran's foreign policy objectives coincide in some areas, but diverge in others, depending on the concrete circumstances. Russia recognizes Iran as a major player in the Middle East, yet like the Arab states does not want Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons. And the Iranian regime understands perfectly well that Russia cannot build relations with Iran to the detriment of the GCC states' security.



While both Moscow and Tehran seek to prevent the victory of Islamist extremists, their long-term goals and visions for a post-Assad Syria differ substantially. Russia values its relationship with Saudi Arabia and the GCC greatly, but it has found advancing these ties challenging in light of the importance that it places on its relationship with its southern neighbor, Iran. As regional conflict has reached unacceptably high levels,

Russia has been alarmed by Riyadh's decision to contain Iran by force.

In an effort to break the cycle of violence, Russia is promoting a new regional security order. The Arab states agree to in principle, but they are presently refusing to integrate Iran until Tehran starts pursuing a policy of good-neighbourliness and non-interference. However, the initiative's viability depends upon Iran's involvement, and so Russian efforts have now focused on encouraging a GCC–Iran dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

The GCC states should also appreciate the evolving nature of Russian–US relations, and the dynamic nature of regional alliances. Today, the US' allies in the region are not necessarily Russia's enemies, in the same way that Moscow's friends are not Washington's foes. All their disagreements about Syria notwithstanding, a further escalation in the Gulf – a region of utmost importance for the world economy and global financial systems – is not in the interest of either power. In the search for what would be a historical reconciliation in the Gulf, the common terrorist threat posed by ISIL and Al Qaeda could be a critical uniting factor between all parties. GCC and Iran both have ambitious plans for economic development, and the best way to realize those plans will be to contribute to forging a favorable external environment.

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<sup>5</sup> Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ министра иностранных дел России С.В. Лаврова 15.09.2016, [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy\\_/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/..](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy_/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/)

## 4. A GCC Perspective

Omar Mahmood, Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies



In light of the Middle East's dire situation at present, there are stark differences in the political prisms through which the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Russia view the region. While most of the GCC states find themselves in a proxy war against Iran, and view it as a belligerent actor in the region, Russia has increased its cooperation and partnership with the Islamic Republic. A similar confliction of interests can be found in Syria, where states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have invested tremendous political

capital in supporting Syrian rebels, Russia has deployed its political, economic and military might in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Historically, GCC-Russia relations have never realized their full potential, marred by misunderstandings and, on many occasions, opposing views of geopolitical events. Recent years have seen an attempt by both sides to elevate cooperation, as reflected by the increased back-and-forth visits by high level officials, economic investments, and the potential sale of military equipment. GCC members such as the Kingdom of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have developed much more concrete relationships with their Russian counterparts. There remain many as yet unexplored opportunities, but a host of obstacles must be overcome.

In an ever-changing region and now with a new and unknown political figure in President-elect Trump; what is the trajectory of GCC-Russia relations? Will events in the region see an alignment of interests, or further hurdles that impede this growing relationship? From the perspective of some GCC analysts, the ball is in Russia's court.

### The Past and Today

Russia's regional role has always been minimal compared to that of various western powers, such as the EU and US, especially since Egypt chose to align with the US at the USSR's expense in the 1970s. Yet, in an unforeseen turn of events, due to a combination of unintentional US action and inaction in the region, Russia finds itself back in the Middle East in what appears to be a geopolitical position of strength. From the Gulf to the Mediterranean and beyond, Russia finds itself playing some role.





Russia has no doubt taken advantage of the US political shift away (in many aspects) from the region, and the troubling ties that the US has formed with many of the states, including the GCC countries under the Obama administration. It is also no secret that GCC has sought to diversify its partnerships and alliances, in an effort to reduce its reliance on the US.



Thus far, there have been a total of four strategic dialogues held between the GCC and Russia in the last few years.<sup>6</sup> This does not include the various high level delegations that have visited Russia. For example, HM King of Bahrain has met with Putin in Moscow twice this year, with the last visit in September.<sup>7</sup> Since the late 2000s, almost all visits and discussions with Putin has taken place in Russia. While Putin has visited the GCC

only once in the last ten years.<sup>8</sup>

## The Russian Role

The fact the Putin has visited the Gulf once since 2007 points to an imbalance in the relationship between the two, which has perhaps led to further misunderstandings. In contrast, President Putin visited Iran as recently as November 2015.<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to assess what sort of role Russia envisages for itself in the Middle East. There have been a multitude of op-eds calling this the "Russian century" and the re-emergence of Russia as a great power in the region and beyond.

The view from the region and beyond is that Putin has been playing a short-term zero-sum game of one-upmanship against the US from Europe to the Middle East. Russia's desire to be a global power requires a more nuanced and long term view; especially of the second and third order effects of its actions.

For the GCC states, and especially Saudi Arabia, Russian backing of Iran (through sale of sophisticated military equipment) and its military and political support of the Syrian regime is of grave concern. The nuclear deal has only emboldened Iran's aggressive actions and seen an uptick in its support for terrorist groups throughout the region. The campaign by the Syrian regime against

<sup>6</sup> <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/lavrov-hails-gcc-russia-strategic-dialogue-1.1835364>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/743897>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.arabnews.com/node/942686/columns>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-president-putin-irans-supreme-leader-khamenei-meet-over-syria-1448300828>

its own people has had a devastating spillover impact. The GCC states have been patient observers of Russia's actions.

The GCC states have attempted to use various economic and political levers to bring Russia closer. Most GCC–Russia business and economic initiatives have yet to see the light of day. Per one Russian expert, Russian business is notoriously slow at responding to challenges and seizing opportunities.<sup>10</sup> Economic and business decision making circles in Russia have little understanding of the Middle East. Furthermore, as Abdulaziz Sager (Chairman of the Gulf Research Center) points out, economic incentives, in trying to bring Russia in to the GCC fold, have clearly been insufficient, in spite of being potentially highly profitable for all parties.<sup>11</sup> This further supports the view that Russia seems to have hedged its bet with Tehran and Damascus with a disregard to wider GCC interests.



## Alliances and President-Elect Trump



Moscow has hoped that the disappointment with the Obama administration would lead most of the GCC states to rethink their alliances with the US. While they have reevaluated, expanded and sought to improve their alliances, the assumption that they would end up at Moscow's door step, whatever the cost, is likely to be an inaccurate one. In fact, disappointment with the US role in the region has led to a much more forceful and proactive foreign policy by the GCC states.

Furthermore, with the election of Trump, the possibility of rehabilitating relations between the Gulf states and the US has also substantially increased, further improving the GCC's position. While media rhetoric has spoken of a new reset of relations

between the US and Russia, there are no real signs which point to any great bargains being made in the region at the cost of US traditional allies. Most of the individuals that make up the Trump team

<sup>10</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2016/09/05/Why-Russia-sees-Bahrain-as-a-partner-in-the-Middle-East.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.arabnews.com/node/942686/columns>

are ardent supporters of actions against Iran, and have even called for further punitive action to be taken against Russia.

## Where Next?

The GCC states understand and acknowledge the importance of Russia as a major global player, and its potential role in the region. It is also clear that Russia has an old and historic relationship with Iran that will not end any time soon, nor is it expected of Russia to take steps to diminish such ties.

Russia, on the other hand, must make an increased and serious effort in understanding the threats that the GCC states face from states like Iran, and appreciate the impetus provided to terrorist groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda due to the detrimental interference of Iran in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states.



Another way forward is to increase the number of strategic dialogues held, which must include candid and frank discussions between the various parties. President Putin reciprocating the visits made by GCC leaders by visiting the Gulf would be a welcome development, as would concrete steps that reflect an understanding of the threats that Iranian interference has upon GCC security.

While the potential in GCC–Russia relations is tremendous, Iran will always prove to be an obstacle in some way and form. Today, in a region beset with conflict, the GCC countries constitute the most stable and prosperous group of states, with political, military and economic levers of power. The challenge for policymakers on both sides is to devise ways of unlocking these latent opportunities.



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Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies

For more information:

Tel: (+973) 17 752 717

Fax: (+973) 17 754 440

[info@derasat.org.bh](mailto:info@derasat.org.bh)