

The GCC in the Eastern Med: balancing economic and security interests



Michael Stephens

Royal United Services Institute

The Eastern Mediterranean continues to be an area of growing importance for some GCC States, on the back of commercial interests, political antagonism, and broader security concerns. In the last years, Gulf involvement has weighed more heavily towards the security dimension, in no small part due to the projection of the GCC rift into the region. Yet if Gulf Arab States are to reap the dividends of their much-needed investments in the region's commercial infrastructure, it will be in their interest to minimize military posturing and focus instead on economic partnerships.

The entry of the Gulf States into questions of European security is a phenomenon that may puzzle outside observers. Europe's southern neighbourhood is not a region that has traditionally been the arena of Arab states. After all, none of the Gulf States can match the military and strategic power of the major European States, and in an arena dominated by medium powers, most of whom are also NATO allies, it seems odd that the nations of the Gulf would try to carve out roles for themselves.

However, in recent years the Gulf States have demonstrated that they have the ability to amplify the political discussion around existing tensions in the Mediterranean, and shift the strategic rules of the game. As historical rivals Greece and Turkey square off against each other, competing for maritime space, and increasingly adopting strategies of containment and encirclement, the Gulf states (particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) have lent their financial, military and diplomatic weight, thereby connecting two seemingly disparate parts of the world together in ways that have not been seen before.

While the scope and scale of the Gulf's engagement with Europe is unprecedented, the debate is not necessarily new. The Gulf States as a collective have tried to engage with NATO on a number of occasions, and at times sought to build a strategic dialogue with its member states. The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative launched in June 2004 was the most serious and sustained diplomatic effort that drew in the GCC states into questions of regional security, and alignment with NATO. Times were of course different back then. The United States maintained a hegemonic grip on world affairs, Turkey had yet to turn its attentions toward the Arab world, and the Gulf States were largely consumed with mitigating the threat from Iraq's descent into violence following the removal of Saddam Hussain. There was little need for a NATO-GCC alliance at that time and so, while much was promised, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative never really delivered.

New dynamics at play

Fast forward fifteen years and the situation is quite different. A myriad of revolutions, and conflicts in the area have created a string of weakened and broken states that have become havens for non-state actors, all competing for power and seeking to gain advantage over their rivals. The US is no longer the only player in town, Russia has begun to push its influence into the Mediterranean, and Chinese economic influence has been solidified across the region as Chinese companies buy up infrastructure in Israel, Cyprus, Turkey and Greece.

In response to this shift in the global order the states of the Middle East have formed into distinct blocs, each with competing interests and goals. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel, states with strong ties to the West, have largely sought to re-establish a sense of order in the Arab world, by propping up Sisi's Egypt, and looking to push back against Iran wherever possible. In opposition to this stands the bilateral axis of Turkey and Qatar, again closely tied to the West (and Turkey through NATO). And lastly in opposition to the West, and both the other two axes is the axis of resistance led by Iran, with its mobilisation of non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In recent times there has been an attempt to close the gaps, Qatar's reintegration into the GCC has cooled the tensions between Doha and its neighbours, and Turkey's economic struggles have led it to seek a form of rapprochement with the wider Gulf as well. But tensions still remain, and the distrust and the regional encirclement of Turkey continues on apace, exemplified by recent Air Force exercises conducted jointly by Greece and Saudi Arabia.

Security interests

In the case of the Eastern Mediterranean the reason for this game of strategic chess is multifaceted. But its drivers stem primarily from the mutual antipathy that Abu Dhabi and Ankara hold for each other. Their political outlooks could not be more different. Ankara views political Islam as a crucial anchor of Arab politics and regional stability. Abu Dhabi on the other hand views political Islam as an existential threat, that could undo the vision for a prosperous (although apolitical) society that it has tried so hard to build. The reality is that between these two visions of regional order there is no middle ground.

And so, the two have sought to blunt each other at every turn. Turkey has sought to expand its influence into the Gulf by doubling down on its close ally Qatar, and expanded its influence on the western side of the Arabian Peninsula via basing and military infrastructure in Somalia. The UAE has had to respond in kind building bases in Socotra, Djibouti, and strengthening its military cooperation with Israel, Cyprus and Greece.

Both the UAE and Turkey have adopted a variation of "forward defence", pushing their strategic interests further and further away from their own borders and into weaker states in the surrounding area. The idea being that if the strategic line can be held further away, then the homeland is relatively safe. This explains why both nations fought to an effective stalemate in Libya. Neither Turkey nor the UAE could afford to let their chosen proxies lose the fight for political control, for fear that it would lead to weaknesses being exposed closer to home.

Outside of Libya the UAE has chosen a more structured approach to its alliances, tying its interests to states surrounding Turkey's periphery that seek common cause in containing Ankara's influence. The recent normalisation process between the UAE and Israel is in part driven by their mutual frustration with Turkey, and distrust of Iran (amongst other things). But the UAE has also built strong relationships with Cyprus, Greece, and has also encouraged France, the Mediterranean's pre-eminent power, to be more deeply involved in regional affairs.

The Emiratis and Israelis have been collectively showing support for Greece since as early as 2019, when the fighter jets of all three nations took part in the Iniohos 2019 strategic exercises. Israel maintains broad cooperation with the Greek Air Force and has participated in numerous military exercises of air, sea and ground forces with the Mediterranean country, but the addition of the UAE marked a clear shift in the political balance when viewed within the context of larger regional developments. Saudi Arabia is also increasing its military cooperation with Greece, as demonstrated by the arrival of the Saudi Royal Air Force's 115th Battalion at the Souda base in Crete for joint exercises with the Greek Armed Forces earlier this month.

Energy and trade interests

Multilateral fora such as the 'Philia Forum', consisting of Greece, Cyprus, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – which last met on 11 February – and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), created in 2020 have been areas in which the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been able to press their influence. Although the Palestinian Authority rejected the UAE's observer status to the EMGF, there is little doubt that Abu Dhabi's influence overhangs the organisation, and the very fact it even applied for observer status signals a conjoining of interests in which Abu Dhabi absolutely believes that oil and gas infrastructure in the area is directly connected to its own national security interests.

UAE interests are not just driven by a focus on Turkey but are reflective of changing global priorities as the geopolitical map shifts away from a Western led order and towards Beijing. As China's Belt and Road initiative has gathered pace around the Red Sea and the Med, the UAE has complemented this by adopting an aggressive acquisition strategy which has secured its influence as a being at the heart of a number of critical logistics hubs which complement the BRI, forming as one Emirati commentator termed it the "buckle" in the Belt. DP World's operation of port terminals stretch from Berbera in the Horn of Africa, to Jeddah's South Container Terminal, to Sokhna in Egypt, Limassol in Cyprus, and Yarimca in Turkey forming a chain of logistic hubs that broadly maps that of Beijing's. The UAE's ports strategy may not have originally been designed with BRI in mind, but now it's there they can hardly ignore that the two nations' interests neatly overlap in an area that is crucial for global logistics and supply chains.



The Way Forward

The recent interest among the Gulf States, and primarily the UAE, in the Eastern Mediterranean is a product of systemic regional insecurity, economic vision, and changing patterns in geopolitics. Of these three factors only one (regional insecurity) is a temporary condition. Which means that the role of the Gulf States in the Eastern Med will be increasing in the short to medium term. This growing role nevertheless presents risks for Gulf States. While Emirati intentions in the Eastern Med are currently closely aligned with those of France and serve the interests of Greece, other EU States may be less forthcoming at the prospect of Abu Dhabi or Riyadh having an increased leverage on Southern European affairs. Additionally, as demonstrated in Libya, strategic overstretch can prove costly and ineffective. Finally, the Turks are unlikely to give up their battle so lightly, and although suffering economically from the result of bad central bank policy and the effects of the Coronavirus (primarily on their export markets and tourism industry), President Erdogan's nationalist narrative to paint his nation as being strategically encircled by rivals and enemies remains a source of political strength and domestic popularity, despite his myriad of economic failings.

In the long term the UAE's investments in civilian infrastructure and logistical hubs in the Eastern Med are likely to pay significant dividends. But both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh should be wary of attempting to do too much too soon in the strategic and political realm given the risk of blowback. For one, trade and investment partnerships with Greece have the potential to create strong commercial bonds, as opposed to military cooperation which risks escalating long-held regional rivalries with Turkey while potentially giving an impression of a security (over-) commitment. Rather than military aid, Israel, Cyprus and Greece require political assurance, investment and a steady hand that can assure the continued prosperity and development of the Eastern Mediterranean region.

There is much to gain by pursuing an economics first strategy at the present time. As the World waits to recover from Covid, those with first-mover advantage in logistics and trade hubs, will surely reap the most benefits. Cross pollinating these benefits with the strategic instability and insecurity of the area will however prove costly and undermine much of what good has been achieved in recent years.

Michael Stephens is an Associate Fellow at RUSI, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). Michael was seconded to the Foreign and Commonwealth in 2017 serving as the Senior Research Analyst for Lebanon and Syria. He specialises in Foreign and Security policy of the UK, and is co-author of "What next for Britain in the Middle East? Security, Trade and Foreign Policy after Brexit" (I.B. Tauris 2021).

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