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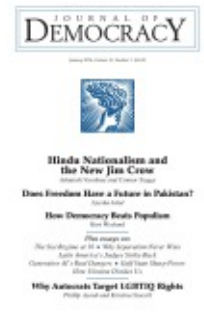
## Gulf States and Sharp Power: Allies to Adversaries

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# GULF STATES AND SHARP POWER: ALLIES TO ADVERSARIES

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has long been considered one of the United States' most steadfast security partners in the Middle East. A recent National Intelligence Council (NIC) assessment of Emirati activities inside the United States, however, suggests a more adversarial relationship: The report, compiled in November 2022, reveals a sustained campaign of hostile actions against U.S. democratic institutions and media, as well as efforts to illegally influence U.S. policy. According to individuals privy to the report, the UAE's activities span multiple presidential administrations, go "well beyond mere influence peddling," and constitute "meddl[ing] in American politics." This sudden scrutiny of the UAE represents a "heightened level of concern and a dramatic departure from the laudatory way the country is discussed in public by U.S. secretaries of state and defense and presidents."<sup>1</sup>

For some, however, the report's conclusions were not entirely unexpected, as the UAE has lately been associated with a range of contentious exploits in not only the United States, but across Western Europe and elsewhere. So too have been the fellow Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to varying degrees. These states' activities have gone beyond aggressive lobbying, weaponized legal maneuvers ("lawfare"), or propaganda to now include sophisticated, well-resourced covert influence operations. In some instances, they have even been accused of outright espionage (including computer hacking and agent infiltration) and—in Saudi Arabia's case—the assassination, rendition, and intimidation of Saudis residing in the United States and Europe.

Alongside this spying and Saudi Arabia's political violence, these monarchies appear to be employing a form of "sharp power" in their dealings with Western democracies. The International Forum for Democratic Studies coined this term in 2017 to describe contemporary efforts

by authoritarian regimes to “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries.” Through these methods, authoritarian regimes can distort the political environment within democracies and “sap the integrity of [democracies’] independent institutions” to suit their interests.<sup>2</sup>

## Friend or Foe

At first glance, this surge in hostility may seem confusing. The creation of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—similar to the other Gulf monarchies—was closely intertwined with British imperial and U.S. Cold War interests. Since then, these states have maintained mostly beneficial, if lopsided, relations with the Western powers. U.S. and European companies, for example, assumed the leading role in building up their nascent hydrocarbon industries and received privileged access to lucrative concessions and joint ventures. Soon after, Gulf oil began to be sold exclusively in “petrodollars,” which were then routinely recycled into U.S. Treasury bonds and stakes in major Western companies, infrastructure, and real estate. In parallel, Western militaries began serving as the ultimate security guarantors in the Gulf (as exemplified by the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait in 1991), while Gulf countries channeled billions of dollars in hydrocarbon revenues into Western arms procurements.

By the twenty-first century, these military or “hard power” arrangements were joined by considerable efforts—particularly by the ultra-wealthy Emiratis and Qataris—to acquire “soft power” influence in the West. Building on their age-old predilection for “checkbook diplomacy” across the Arab and Islamic worlds, these “friendly” monarchies began acquiring or sponsoring big-name Western sporting, cultural, and educational brands. These included top-class soccer teams, prestigious horse races, famous museums and galleries, and several of the world’s leading universities and research institutions.

Despite some hiccups, the overall relationship between the West and these Gulf states seems to have remained strong, or at least synergistic. In the last few years, for example, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have augmented their U.S. Treasury holdings, while Qatar has emerged as one of the European Union’s largest gas providers and Britain’s “supplier of last resort.”<sup>3</sup> Major arms deals have continued apace. In early 2022, the United States upgraded Qatar to “major non-NATO ally” status, and in 2023 the United States and Saudi Arabia began to discuss a new mutual-defense treaty. Meanwhile, Emirati, Saudi, and Qatari soft-power building has undoubtedly intensified: In addition to ramping up funding of major think tanks, these three countries are now among the top foreign donors to U.S. universities.<sup>4</sup> In terms of sports, too, Emirati and Qatari investments have accelerated, and Saudi Arabia has now jumped in, purchasing Britain’s Newcastle United soccer team

in 2021 and bankrolling the controversial LIV Golf Tour, which has now merged with the PGA Tour.

In addition to these close ties, what is puzzling about the hostile activities now associated with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar is that they have typically been the domain of states more conspicuously belligerent or antagonistic toward the West. The aforementioned NIC assessment of the UAE notes that it is rare for U.S. intelligence to focus in this way on a “friendly nation rather than an adversarial power such as Russia, China or Iran.” More to the point, notwithstanding some exploratory work on the Gulf monarchies,<sup>5</sup> sharp-power studies have concentrated on traditional Western rivals. The International Forum’s 2017 report, for example, documented Russian and Chinese efforts to subvert democracies in Latin America and Central Europe, while subsequent investigations have scrutinized Iranian and North Korean operations against the United States and other major democracies.

So what explains this change in behavior by some Gulf monarchies toward Western democracies? Various sources—government reports, intelligence assessments, court proceedings, and my interviews with former Gulf officials and policy advisors—suggest that a mix of domestic and geopolitical motives have been steering Emirati, Saudi, and Qatari leaders into uncharted waters, inevitably compromising their established relations. More broadly, there appears to be a robust correlation between the most adversarial forms of Gulf sharp power and the increasingly autocratic nature of these regimes, particularly in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This, in turn, signals that the widening fault lines between the world’s democracies and autocracies might now be separating once-close international partners.

### **Covert Influence Operations**

The UAE, according to newspaper coverage of the NIC report, has participated in “illegal and legal attempts to steer U.S. foreign policy in ways favorable to the Arab autocracy” and

exploit[ed] the vulnerabilities in American governance, including its reliance on campaign contributions, susceptibility to powerful lobbying firms and lax enforcement of disclosure laws intended to guard against interference by foreign governments.

In March 2018, for example, it was reported that a top UAE advisor had been funneling large donations via a U.S. fundraiser to American lawmakers considering legislation targeting Qatar, which had emerged as the UAE’s chief regional rival.<sup>6</sup> In July 2023, the same man, together with a U.S. businessman, was then convicted of facilitating “unlawful contributions” from the UAE to “unwitting political committees in order to gain access to and influence with a then-candidate for President of the United States and others in connection with the 2016 U.S. presidential election.”<sup>7</sup>

Details have also surfaced of a deceptive Saudi campaign lobbying against the 2016 passage of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA). By allowing U.S. victims of international terrorism to sue any country (as opposed to only those formally designated as state sponsors of terrorism), JASTA effectively exposed Saudi Arabia to a long-running lawsuit from the families of 9/11 victims who attribute blame for the attacks to elements of the Saudi state. In response, the Saudi embassy in the United States reportedly hired more than seventy subcontractors to recruit dozens of U.S. veterans to travel to Washington, meet with lawmakers, and stress their opposition to JASTA (on the grounds that it could have unintended consequences for U.S. personnel overseas, who might also be sued). Many of the veterans, however, claimed to be unaware of their de facto Saudi sponsorship, with some saying that they were “flat-out lied to,” as they had been explicitly told that the Saudi government was not behind the campaign. The Justice Department later accused the subcontractors of failing to promptly disclose the role of a foreign state or register the source of their payments.<sup>8</sup>

More dramatically, in late 2022 the Belgian police’s Central Office for the Repression of Corruption launched a far-reaching investigation into a criminal organization involving EU parliamentary officials and the governments of Qatar and, to a lesser extent, Morocco and Mauritania. Prosecutors claim to have extensive evidence that Qatar paid bribes over multiple years to reduce EU criticism of its treatment of migrant workers, especially in the runup to its 2022 World Cup. Qatar also reportedly targeted debates on the EU’s transit agreement with Qatar Airways (signed in October 2021) as well as a pending vote on allowing citizens of Qatar and other Gulf states to travel to the EU without a visa. As Spain’s former foreign minister Arancha González has noted, “Qatargate” threatens the integrity of the European Parliament and its popularly elected members, and thus the heart of the EU’s democratic legitimacy. Likewise, European legal scholar Alberto Alemanno said that Qatargate will “go down in [EU] history as the largest and most damaging political scandal.”<sup>9</sup>

In cyberspace, meanwhile, dozens of social-media propaganda campaigns have been traced back to the Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia. For the most part, these have involved the extensive and coordinated manipulation of content on major U.S.-based platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. With much of the fraudulent material appearing in English and an emphasis on generating fake profiles of supposed U.S. and other Western persons, these campaigns seem to have focused just as much on misleading (or intimidating) Western and international audiences as on influencing local and regional users. In October 2018, for example, Twitter announced that it had suspended thousands of fully automated accounts spreading often identical messages of support for the Emirati and Saudi governments. The *New York Times* even described a “so-called troll farm in Riyadh,” which was “sending them

lists of people to threaten, insult and intimidate; daily tweet quotas to fill; and pro-government messages to augment.”<sup>10</sup>

Since then, these states have only intensified their social-media manipulation efforts: A February 2019 investigation concluded that several verified Twitter accounts had somehow been commandeered by operatives spreading pro-Saudi propaganda.<sup>11</sup> Facebook and Twitter also reported that year to have removed thousands of accounts amplifying Emirati and Saudi positions on Qatar and Yemen, while nearly six-thousand social-media profiles linked to a Saudi company suspected of being part of a “significant state-backed information operation” were shuttered in that December alone.<sup>12</sup> In April 2020, Twitter purged another five-thousand accounts from its platform after they had been connected to a propaganda campaign praising Saudi leadership and criticizing Qatar and Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

## Espionage

The UAE has significantly extended the scope of its longstanding hacking and surveillance capabilities beyond local and regional dissidents to cover a range of Western and other international targets. Notably, the UAE is believed to have spied on U.K. Foreign Office personnel, the prime minister’s residence, British lawyers representing the ex-wife of a senior Emirati sheikh, members of a London-based human-rights organization, and at least three U.S. journalists, beginning in the mid-2010s as part of “Project Raven.”<sup>14</sup>

Although spying between friendly states is nothing new, the UAE’s activities are particularly controversial, not only because they have relied on cutting-edge Western- and Israeli-manufactured systems, but because they have often been operated by former U.S. intelligence staff. Indeed, according to the NIC’s assessment, alongside extensive

meddl[ing] in the American political system, including by hacking into computers in the United States . . . the UAE has sought to become a force in cyberspace and has made questionable use of cyberweapons, including by siphoning ex-U.S. officials into surveillance work against the United States itself.<sup>15</sup>

In September 2021, three former U.S. intelligence personnel—having already confessed to working for the UAE—reached a deferred prosecution agreement with the Justice Department in return for nearly US\$1.7 million in penalty payments. According to a press release, they had been involved in the development of

sophisticated “zero-click” computer hacking and intelligence gathering systems . . . to obtain unauthorized access to computers, like mobile phones, around the world, including in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Saudi Arabia's hacking seems to be following a similar trajectory. In September 2015, its intelligence service had allegedly attempted to buy a leading Italian spyware company.<sup>17</sup> And in late 2017, a senior Saudi official had reportedly opened negotiations with one of the Israeli companies that the UAE had hired, and to have spoken "of grand plans to use its surveillance tools throughout the Middle East and Europe."<sup>18</sup> Soon after, Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with a U.S. company that would "help train the kingdom's growing ranks of cyberfighters" and—as a Saudi spokesman put it—"open great horizons."<sup>19</sup> Already, their victims seem to have included Amazon founder and *Washington Post* owner Jeff Bezos, a *New York Times* journalist writing a book on Saudi politics, and staff at Britain's *Guardian* newspaper.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond hacking, the UAE and Saudi Arabia also appear to have been experimenting with more traditional forms of espionage; both have been accused of having agents in the United States. In August 2022, for example, a former Twitter employee was convicted of spying on behalf of the Saudi state for having "sold private customer information to a foreign government" and attempting to disguise a payment from Saudi officials.<sup>21</sup> Two others believed to have been part of the scheme have already absconded to Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup> As for the UAE, in July 2021 an Emirati businessman (who was based in Los Angeles before fleeing the United States in 2018) was accused of criminally conspiring with U.S. citizens—at the behest of senior UAE officials—to influence Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and his administration's foreign-policy positions, as well as seeking to manipulate public opinion in favor of Emirati interests.<sup>23</sup>

## Political Violence

So far, Saudi Arabia has been the only Gulf state to engage in political violence in the West. As U.S. officials describe, the "Saudi Rapid Intervention Group" (also called the "Tiger Squad") was established in 2017 with the aim of carrying out international missions against influential critics of Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup>

The most infamous of the group's operations is the October 2018 assassination and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul. Though a Saudi citizen, Khashoggi was a U.S. resident who had been writing for the *Washington Post*. Shortly before his death he had authored several of the most scathing and most widely read pieces on Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Moreover, Khashoggi was understood to have been liaising with the 9/11 victims' legal team, with one attorney stating in court proceedings that Khashoggi had "valuable information."<sup>25</sup> In a damning November 2018 report, the CIA not only assessed that Saudi Arabia was responsible for Khashoggi's death, but that MBS himself had likely approved the operation.<sup>26</sup>

According to U.S. officials, the Tiger Squad has also been responsible for forcibly repatriating Saudi citizens from abroad whom the Saudi regime deems problematic and then detaining them in Saudi palaces. In August 2017, for example, reports emerged of three “dissident princes” who had been abducted and returned from France, Italy, and Morocco. In 2019, at least one other “minor prince” was thought to have been seized.<sup>27</sup> In addition, across Europe and North America the Saudi state has been linked to several other cases of planned violence or intimidating behavior. According to a lawsuit brought by a former Saudi security official with ties to an MBS rival, in October 2018 the crown prince sent the Tiger Squad to Canada (where the official lives in exile) with the aim of killing or repatriating him.<sup>28</sup> In April 2019, a renowned Palestinian critic of MBS, living in Norway, revealed that he had been placed under police protection after receiving a warning from authorities that he was in danger from an unspecified threat “emanating from the [Saudi] kingdom.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in January 2020 a London-based Saudi satirist divulged that police had alerted him to a known threat on his life, while in June 2020 a prominent Canada-based Saudi dissident disclosed that authorities had received information indicating that he was a potential target.<sup>30</sup>

## Gulf Motives

One of the most prevalent explanations for the uptick in these hostile activities is that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have been anticipating and preparing for a decline in U.S. influence in the Middle East. After all, during the 2010–11 Arab Spring protests, the region had not only witnessed the United States’ reluctance to prop up pro-Western regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, but also its indifference to mass demonstrations in Bahrain—which only dissipated following a joint Saudi-UAE military intervention. Moreover, the explosion in U.S. shale-oil production starting in 2014 greatly enhanced the country’s energy self-sufficiency (therefore reducing its interest in Gulf hydrocarbon imports), while the Barack Obama administration’s much-touted “pivot to Asia” further shifted U.S. attention away from the Middle East.

In this context, the Gulf monarchies are assumed to be taking matters into their own hands—heedless of established Gulf-Western relations—while at the same time signaling a willingness to cooperate more closely with other world powers. The UAE, for example, has already been working against U.S. interests in Libya, backing forces opposed to the internationally recognized government, including Russia’s Wagner mercenary group.<sup>31</sup> The UAE has also become a hub for evading Western sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its full-blown invasion of Ukraine; the U.S. Treasury Department has even accused the UAE of facilitating the transfer of drones and other military supplies to Rus-



sia.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, a recent U.S. intelligence report alleges that Russian intelligence convinced the UAE to “work together against US and UK intelligence agencies.”<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, in addition to agreeing with India to

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begin settling trade in rupees rather than U.S. dollars,<sup>34</sup> this summer the UAE conducted its first joint air-force training exercises with China,<sup>35</sup> and withdrew from a major U.S.-led regional naval coalition.<sup>36</sup>

Saudi Arabia’s thriving relationship with Russia’s principal sovereign-wealth fund has also proven controversial in the West, especially since the Ukraine war began.<sup>37</sup> So too have reports that Saudi Arabia is manufacturing ballistic missiles with Chinese assistance and that the country’s state-owned oil and gas company is considering pricing some of its oil in Chinese yuan instead of U.S.

dollars.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Qatar has been diversifying its arms purchases away from the West, buying Chinese missile and rocket systems in 2017 and Russian antitank and small arms in 2018. In 2019, Qatar reportedly even carried out early-stage negotiations with Russia for the acquisition of its S-400 missile-defense system.<sup>39</sup>

Although these and other similar actions by Gulf countries have added strain to their relations with the West and probably indicate a long-term geopolitical realignment, in the short term the fundamentals of Gulf-Western relations seem fairly strong. Even if the United States has moved on from Gulf energy imports, Europe is likely to remain dependent for years to come, and neither Russia nor China seem poised to offer the Gulf any blanket security guarantees. If anything, Russia’s lackluster military performance in Ukraine has revived Gulf perceptions that the Western powers remain the best bet, while China—although fêted for brokering the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran—is ultimately still seen by Gulf leaders as freeriding on U.S. maritime protection.

For these reasons, rather than great-power politics, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar’s sharper, new approach to the West seems better explained by issues and grievances particular to the countries themselves—and more specifically to the survival of their authoritarian regimes or to the success of their hawkish regional foreign policies. To some extent, this state-specific focus explains why the other Gulf monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman have largely remained on the sidelines. Indeed, although they undoubtedly share some of the same concerns about the West as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, they have been grappling

with far more challenging domestic economic situations, and in some cases much greater unrest or political polarization.

**The UAE.** In recent years, the UAE has had significant differences with the United States over political Islam, Iranian expansionism, and the need for new leadership in Saudi Arabia, the UAE's closest and most significant ally. The UAE's president and longtime de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), has always identified Islamists as the primary existential threat—not only to his own regime but also to the region's other “moderate” authoritarians. He believes that such groups could challenge religiously legitimated “traditional monarchies” and secular potentates alike, while at the same time putatively conforming to more Western-style democratic processes. For this reason, although MBZ successfully dismantled the UAE's own Islamist chapter between 2011 and 2012, the Emirati officials whom I interviewed at that time expressed great alarm over what they perceived as the Obama administration's betrayal of Egypt and Tunisia's dictators during the Arab Spring. Furthermore, they were dismayed by the speed with which the United States embraced the Islamist political parties that succeeded them.

As a result of his distrust of Islamists, MBZ was also perturbed by Qatar's growing influence in Western policy circles. Qatar—in an effort to hedge against Emirati and Saudi regional dominance—had long provided financial support to Islamist movements, while its Al-Jazeera public media network provided sympathetic coverage of Egypt's most influential Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood.

MBZ also disagreed with Western policy toward Iran: He strongly opposed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which placed limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for Western sanctions relief. He also considered U.S. logistical support for the joint UAE-Saudi intervention against Yemen's Iran-linked Houthis (which also began in 2015) half-hearted and insufficient.

MBZ expressed similar dissatisfaction with U.S. support for Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN), who was Saudi Arabia's crown prince from 2015 to 2017. In addition to evidence of personal animosity between the two men,<sup>40</sup> my interviews with Emirati policy advisors in 2018 and 2019 revealed that MBZ had been unimpressed by MBN's ties to Western intelligence services, ultimately seeing him as incapable of diversifying the country's economy away from oil, reducing public debt, tackling entrenched elite-level corruption, neutering the Islamists, and staving off the failure of the Saudi regime.<sup>41</sup> As a result, MBZ was determined by all means necessary to shift U.S. support to MBS, who was appointed Saudi Arabia's defense minister in January 2015.

**Saudi Arabia.** Unsurprisingly, once MBS became crown prince in 2017, most of Saudi Arabia's concerns with the United States closely

matched those of the UAE. For instance, MBS was understood to have been extremely unsettled by the rising influence of celebrity Saudi Islamist preachers, many of whom had millions of online disciples and were often portrayed in Western media as prodemocracy reformers.<sup>42</sup> MBS was also known to have been particularly affronted by Barack Obama's 2016 *Atlantic* interview, in which the U.S. president strongly criticized the Saudi-Iran rivalry and suggested that the two sides needed to "share the neighborhood."<sup>43</sup>

In addition, amid MBS's efforts to distance his embryonic regime from Saudi Arabia's historic support for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups (and shortly before the aforementioned enactment of JASTA), in July 2016 the U.S. Congress declassified the "28 Pages"—the previously redacted section of a joint congressional report which addressed Saudi connections to the 9/11 attacks. Although the Saudi government had tried to get ahead of the problem by officially supporting the declassification, and then deploying a public-relations campaign to dismiss the report's contents as insignificant, it still feared backlash from the U.S. public.<sup>44</sup>

To an extent, the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States improved under the Trump administration, especially following the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. Furthermore, not only had Trump made MBS the focus of his first overseas state visit in May 2017, but a few weeks later he warmly congratulated MBS on his appointment as crown prince (despite the resulting ouster of the U.S.-backed MBN). Following Khashoggi's assassination, Trump helpfully cast doubt on the CIA's assessment of the situation, while later rejecting a UN request for the FBI to launch an investigation.

Nonetheless, the UAE and Saudi Arabia remained wary, and there was significant tension with the United States on almost all other issues. On Islamism, for example, Trump's efforts to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization effectively stalled, while his initial support on Twitter for the Emirati- and Saudi-led blockade of Qatar (beginning in June 2017) soon fizzled out, and his later attempts to broker a Camp David peace meeting were unwelcome. Even more seriously, Trump was seen as dangerously unreliable on Iran. Not only had he backed away from planned U.S. strikes on Iran in June 2019, but a few months later he failed to push for any kind of U.S. retaliation following Iranian proxy-linked drone attacks on key Saudi oil infrastructure.

Although the administration of Trump's successor, Joe Biden, may not have made matters worse (as many in the UAE and Saudi Arabia had feared, given his campaign promises to hold MBS to account), there has been a sense that nothing has improved either. The end of the Qatar blockade a few weeks before Biden's inauguration, for example, was more likely motivated by MBS's desire to present a united

Gulf Arab front against Iran, rather than a spirit of reconciliation or a need to placate the incoming U.S. administration. In fact, there may be considerable Emirati resentment of the Qatar deal. Meanwhile, the U.S. security guarantee continues to be questioned. The January 2022 Houthi-linked air attacks on Abu Dhabi's airport elicited no specific U.S. retaliation (and may have even prompted the United States to demand payment for further defense assistance).<sup>45</sup> Likewise, March 2022 cross-border strikes on several key Saudi energy and desalination facilities drew little more than a bland U.S. condemnation, and certainly no military response.

**Qatar.** Most of Qatar's concerns with the United States have been equally serious, but often reflect very different goals and priorities. In the wake of the Arab Spring, for example, Doha's primary grievance was not over Washington's apparent disloyalty to the leaders of Egypt and Tunisia, but rather its indifference toward the July 2013 Emirati- and Saudi-backed military coup in Egypt. The stakes grew higher in 2017, when Qatar was unable to persuade the United States to bring the blockade to an end, despite the significant U.S. military presence on Qatari soil. Even though Qatar's relations with the United States have undeniably improved under Biden—given the end of the blockade and the country's upgrade to major non-NATO-ally status—tension has been rising with other Western states.

For instance, the Qatari government was concerned that any formal European criticism or investigation into its affairs might detract from (or thwart) its already controversial hosting of the 2022 World Cup, which was viewed as central to diversifying the economy away from gas and accumulating further soft power. As a result, in addition to trying to steer economically consequential EU debates in Qatar's favor (as exemplified by the aforementioned air-transit agreement), the regime felt an increasing need to push back against any claims involving corruption, human-rights abuses, or other controversial issues. Earlier, after all, Qatar's foreign minister had resorted to dismissing European coverage of the country's migrant worker conditions and the allegations of graft over its World Cup bid as a "bashing campaign" rooted in "prejudice and racism."<sup>46</sup>

## The Bigger Picture

Beyond the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar's particular motives—which mostly conform to the expectations of "realist" theory—their increased hostility toward the West correlates strongly with the deepening authoritarianism of their already nondemocratic regimes, which in recent years have stopped pretending to back reform or even paying lip service to democratization. If anything, parallel to the global phenom-

enon of “democratic backsliding,” they are emerging as prime examples of unabashed and assertive authoritarianism.

Headline assessments of the levels of democracy (or rather authoritarianism) in these countries strongly suggest a tightening up of almost all remaining political and civic freedoms. Five years ago, for instance, the democracy watchdog Freedom House had assigned the UAE a Global Freedom Score of 20 (on a 100-point scale), while Saudi Arabia scored 10 and Qatar scored 26. By 2022, however, their scores had fallen even further into the Not Free category, with the UAE receiving 18, Saudi Arabia 8, and Qatar 25. Data from the Varieties of Democracy project tell much the same story, with much of the decline blamed on free-speech clampdowns and increasing restrictions on NGOs.

Publicly too, these states seem clearer about their authoritarian turn. MBS, for example, once told a Silicon Valley gathering that “there is an advantage to . . . the kind of fast change that an absolute monarch can do in one step that would take a traditional democracy 10 steps.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, a senior UAE official confirmed in 2012 that a multiparty system was not part of his government’s “end goal” as it does not “correspond with our culture or historical development.”<sup>48</sup> Though Qatar finally held its first Consultative Assembly elections in October 2021 (after eight years of delays), no effort was made to ensure fair suffrage: A pernicious new electoral law excluded entire tribes and thousands of naturalized citizens.

As the regimes of the UAE and Saudi Arabia have grown more authoritarian, they have also grown more personalistic. Notably the old, consensus-based model of governance appears to have been superseded by MBZ’s and MBS’s much tighter inner circles comprising full brothers and close friends.<sup>49</sup> This autocratic shift has given MBZ and MBS uninhibited control over the levers of state power, including foreign policy, national security, and the intelligence services. Moreover, clearly “treating the arms of the state as their personal instruments”—as per Max Weber’s classic definition of sultanism—and arbitrarily ignoring traditional constraints on their power, their governments have already been behaving in rash, mistake-prone, or overly aggressive manners.

Importantly, this trend is not as apparent in the other Gulf monarchies. It is hard to claim that Qatar’s emir rules in a personalistic manner; several others still wield considerable behind-the-scenes influence. Kuwait’s ruling family is fragmented; its emir is unable to diffuse dynastic struggles or contain the National Assembly. Even if Bahrain is becoming more authoritarian, this seems to be driven by collective regime interests rather than one individual’s power grab. Meanwhile, Oman’s new ruler (the Gulf’s only official “sultan”), has already committed to business as usual. His decision to grant powerful portfolios to presumed rivals suggests that he may even be open to ruling by coalition.

Overall, it seems significant that of the three Gulf states most willing to deploy hostile tactics toward the West, the two pursuing the riskiest forms of sharp power—the UAE and Saudi Arabia—represent the most extreme cases of personalism (or as I have termed it, based on their high levels of economic development, “advanced sultanism”).<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, although these three countries’ efforts to selectively disrupt Western institutions, sow confusion, and (in Saudi Arabia’s case) wield political violence have clearly been means to state-specific ends, they have undoubtedly weakened the West’s democratic integrity and compromised its security. After all, their operatives have tampered with political campaigns, subverted parliaments, stolen sensitive data, and intimidated (and sometimes killed) Western residents.

Relations between the Gulf and the West have therefore entered a more complex and unpredictable era, and the broader ramifications are already being felt: Historic allies are not exempt from the growing split between democracies and autocracies, future Gulf-Western policy cooperation is now far from assured, and the West must reevaluate its national-security priorities toward the Gulf. Greater nuance is already appearing in Gulf-focused intelligence assessments, reframing the Gulf states as potential adversaries (as per the NIC’s report on the UAE), while the European Parliament has been drafting new guidelines on interactions with Gulf diplomats and lobbyists.<sup>51</sup>

Such measures are unlikely to be enough. The West has little real control over the increasingly authoritarian turn of its Gulf “partners,” and there is every indication that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar will continue to view Western democratic institutions and national security as fair game. Thus there is urgent need for more robust counterespionage capabilities calibrated to the Gulf and its well-resourced influence operations. Western democracies have begun a new chapter with the Gulf states, and their ties should be rooted in present realities, not the receding past.

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