

How Trump can deal with Iran-GCC conflict

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While many aspects of President-elect Donald Trump's foreign policy beliefs were murky on the campaign trail, one overarching theme stood out: that the United States has done far too much to underwrite free-riding allies the world over. "Our allies must contribute toward the financial, political and human costs of our tremendous security burden," Trump declared in April. "They look at the United States as weak and forgiving and feel no obligation to honor their agreements with us." This problem, which has been echoed by President Barack Obama, is most acute in the Middle East, where US regional allies have overseen regional collapse and the rise of violent insurgent groups all the while doing little to share the burden of providing regional security.

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monarchies, are more threatened by the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology of IS than other regional states. "If Saudi Arabia was without the cloak of American protection ... I don't think it would be around," said Trump.

Coupled with Trump's desire for regional allies to do more to provide for their security is an explicit understanding he has that US military intervention in the Middle East has achieved little and comes at far too great a cost. "We've been fighting this war for 15 years," he told "60 Minutes" Nov. 13. "We've spent \$6 trillion in the Middle East, \$6 trillion, we could have rebuilt our country twice."

Recently, I attended the Third Annual Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, where hundreds of regional Arab participants claimed that Iran is bent on regional hegemony and interferes in the affairs of Arab countries. Additionally, they blamed the United States for attacking Afghanistan and Iraq and handing the region to Iran. As the only Iranian at the conference, I reminded them that the US war on terror was triggered by the Sept. 11 attacks, which was carried out by 19 hijackers, 15 of whom were Saudis. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was for years also a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ally, which supported him throughout the brutal eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Afterward, when Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, the GCC called on the United States and its allies to come to their rescue and push back Saddam. In the case of two other Arab countries — Libya and Yemen — that have collapsed in recent years, the GCC was directly involved in military strikes that destroyed the state in these countries.

Trump's line of thinking on these issues is in the right direction. To foster a more peaceful Persian Gulf, it is imperative for the United States and its allies to play a more assertive role in fostering regional stability and for America to abandon strategies centered on regime change and military intervention.

Nurturing local buy-in: the Helsinki template

The proxy wars between rival power centers that characterize the modern Middle East today are not too dissimilar from those of Europe of a few decades ago. During the Cold War, the United States and its NATO allies were locked in an ever-escalatory face-off with the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. Europe was the front line, where tensions were frequently at the brink and seemed bound to spiral out of control. That is, until the 1975 Helsinki Accords and the formation of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

The Helsinki Accords started a process whereby the states of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, as well the neutral states of Europe, could sit down without preconditions and discuss their security concerns. Founded on the principles of respect for sovereignty, non-use of force, respect for borders and territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes and noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries, the CSCE allowed for these states to come to the same table and air their security grievances and discuss nonviolent ways to resolve them.

Over the course of two decades, CSCE meetings resulted in critical transparency measures, arms limits and information exchanges that palpably lowered tensions across the European continent. In 1994, the CSCE process was institutionalized into a proper security structure: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

A CSCE-type process for the Persian Gulf — one which includes Iran, Iraq and the six states of the GCC — can be a way toward fostering a stable regional order. While much separates these states today, a gradual process that begins with their simply holding regular meetings where they can communicate their security grievances can result in more cooperative relationships' developing over time.

The United States, Russia and the European Union have a critical role to play in order for a CSCE-type process to take hold in the Persian Gulf. The West must use its leverage with its GCC allies to encourage them to engage Iran. Only through such talks aimed at an established regional cooperation system akin to the OSCE — where local powers take into consideration each other's interests and cooperate against common threats — can a durable peace

be reached in the Persian Gulf. Such a peace would fulfill Trump's vision of a Middle East that sees less American involvement and US allies who assume a substantive role in preserving regional security.

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