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Intrigue Surrounding Saudi Arabia’s Succession Masks Looming Strategic Dangers

By Chris Zambelis

Despite all of the surrounding hype, the recent death of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and the subsequent succession of his half-brother King Salman bin Abdelaziz Al Saud culminated in anti-climax. Reports about an impending crisis of succession between competing factions led by the so-called “Sudairi Clan” (also referred to as the “Sudairi Seven”) – the surviving members of the seven sons of the Kingdom’s founder King Abdulaziz Ibn Al Saud and his favorite wife, Hassa bin Ahmed al-Sudairi – and an alliance of rival branches within the royal family that threatened to destabilize the kingdom proved to be overblown.

King Salman’s status as one of the surviving members of the Sudairi Clan has ensured the return of this powerful bloc to a position of dominance in Saudi politics. King Abdullah, who was not part of the Sudairi Clan, acted to diminish the faction’s influence through the cultivation of rival alliances within the royal family and mechanisms such as the Allegiance Council, a consultative body that was designed to help determine lines of succession to the throne. Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin Abdelaziz, who himself was touted as a possible successor to King Abdullah, was elevated to Crown Prince and heir to the throne while Interior Minister Muhammed bin Nayef was appointed to the positions of Deputy Crown Prince and Second Deputy Premier. King Salman also removed a number of notable advisors and other prominent figures appointed by the late King Abdullah during his tenure to further consolidate his hold on the throne.

It is easy to become engrossed in the machinations of intra-family royal court politics in Saudi Arabia. An honest appraisal of the state of the kingdom suggests that the most pertinent repercussions of Saudi Arabia’s transition were overlooked by analysts in favor of the personality feuds and intrigue that we have come to associate with palace politics. The kingdom’s continued reliance on an antiquated hereditary succession model relative to the growing demands for political liberalization and democratization being witnessed around the Arab world is just one among a host of issues that have received short shrift. This is the case despite the fact that the entrenched authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia has amplified or has otherwise been responsible for the host of severe social, political, economic, demographic, security, and cultural challenges that confront the kingdom.

In a region beset by disorder and upheaval, it is understandable why the prospect of political change in Saudi Arabia has drawn so much scrutiny. It is hard to overestimate Saudi Arabia’s geopolitical significance as the world’s largest exporter of oil and the second largest overall producer of oil. The kingdom also boasts the world’s largest known oil reserves with around 16 percent of total proven reserves. Just as important, Saudi Arabia commands the world’s largest spare oil production capacity. In a world economy fueled by hydrocarbon energy, there should be no surprise why so many observers remain fixated on the potential repercussions of political change in the kingdom. For its part, Saudi Arabia has traditionally leveraged its position as the world’s preeminent oil producer alongside its strategic alliance with the United States as a guarantee of its sovereignty and security in light of numerous regional and international threats.

The kingdom has also drawn from its self-anointed religious legitimacy as the Custodian of the Two Holy Cities, a reference to Islam’s two holiest mosques – Masjid al-Haram (Grand Mosque) at Mecca and Masjid al-Nabawi (Prophet’s Mosque) in Medina – to justify its authority within Saudi Arabia, as well as among Arabs and Muslims worldwide. Riyadh continues to leverage this perceived legitimacy in the face of domestic, ideological, and geopolitical challenges to its rule.

By all accounts, the largely unremarkable transition process that ensued following King Abdullah’s death put its principal benefactor in Washington and global oil consumers and energy analysts at ease. In light of
the political turbulence that continues to shake the wider Arab world, Saudi Arabia has reassured its allies and partners, led by the U.S., that Riyadh is committed to maintaining a trajectory of stability. However, in today’s rapidly changing Middle East these qualities no longer carry the weight that they once did. The scale of Saudi Arabia’s domestic problems requires tangible and genuine reforms, not the preservation of a flawed status quo.

Enduring Authoritarianism

Saudi Arabia has historically exercised absolute authority over its subjects – it is difficult to apply the civic conception of citizenship to authoritarian regimes – in exchange for the provision of an array of social and other welfare services, including adequate housing, employment, health care, education, and subsidies toward key goods and services paid for by oil revenues. These dynamics have served to underpin an unwritten social contract between the royal family and the Saudi population whereby the incumbent authorities provide for their subjects in exchange for their loyalty. Yet, the perils of Saudi Arabia’s enduring authoritarian model are becoming increasingly apparent and have undermined the kingdom’s long-term prospects. Saudi Arabia faces a litany of challenges that span the social, political, economic, geopolitical, and cultural realms. The scale of these challenges far exceeds the capacity of the state to ensure the acquiescence let alone loyalty of its subjects. Nonetheless, one of newly inaugurated King Salman’s first initiatives involved the transfer of USD 30 billion to state employees and those retired from state service in the form of increases in salary and pensions, respectively. He also announced a series of additional domestic social and economic initiatives that target students and other segments of Saudi society. King Salman pursued these initiatives even as the kingdom faces a budget deficit in 2015 resulting from the dramatic decline in global oil prices.

King Abdullah was lauded as a visionary and a reformer. His track record for promoting social, political, and economic reforms, by Saudi Arabia’s standards, is worthy of note. Yet the kingdom remains intolerant to political dissent at home. Riyadh’s atrocious human rights record is a testament to the pervasiveness of its authoritarian model. The role of the ultraconservative religious establishment in Saudi Arabia remains an omnipresent social, cultural, and political force in formal institutions as well as all aspects of everyday life, including the role of women in Saudi society.

The kingdom’s state-directed promulgation of hard-line Wahabbist and Salafist interpretations of Sunni Islam is a case in point. In addition to exacerbating social pressures, the endorsement of these ideologies has helped to incubate a host of violent extremist movements, including groups such as al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as well as Daesh (“Islamic State”), that eventually set their sights on the kingdom. The endorsement of these perspectives also contributes to a climate of heightened sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi’ites around the Middle East. The puritanical brand of Islam promoted by the Saudi religious establishment tends to view Shi’ite Muslims as heretics and apostates. Equally important, they inflame tensions between the kingdom’s Sunni majority and sizeable Shi’ite community of believers, a population that continues to face widespread discrimination and other pressures in Saudi society.

Strategic Challenges

Saudi Arabia’s political transition occurred during a period of intense domestic and regional volatility. The exhibitions of popular dissent and demands for liberty and democracy heard around the wider Arab world sent shockwaves through the collection of entrenched autocrats and potentates. Many of the grievances that propelled millions of Arabs to take to the streets in an unprecedented display of defiance resonate deeply with ordinary Saudis. The state of corruption, illegitimate and repressive governance, lack of accountability, absence of rule of law, poor human rights conditions, mismanagement and inefficiency, and the overall sense of hopelessness that has come to define the lives of so many Arabs – especially the
dominant youthful cohort of the region’s populations – are also endured to different degrees by large segments of Saudi Arabia’s population.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia’s style of authoritarianism far exceeds that seen in the regimes such as those in Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia that would experience popular and sustained uprisings. It is no surprise that the popular democratic impulses witnessed around the Arab world were viewed as a threat in the kingdom. In particular, the rapid rise of democratic Islamist movements that participated in the political process associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in places such as Tunisia and Egypt represented numerous threats to the kingdom. Saudi Arabia, in essence, viewed these movements as a dangerous model that could be replicated at home. Similarly, the Islamist character of these movements likewise posed a threat to the royal family’s claim to religious legitimacy absent of a democratic and popular mandate to govern.

Saudi Arabia faces numerous demographic challenges. While many of the countries in the wider Middle East are experiencing stable or otherwise declining fertility rates, Saudi Arabia’s population of around 29 million continues to grow. Despite its tremendous oil wealth, a growing segment of the kingdom’s population has had to endure severe poverty and underdevelopment. Some estimates place the number of Saudis living in poverty to exceed a quarter of the population. Saudi Arabia’s largely youthful population adds another level of complexity to the question of poverty and demographics. For example, around two-thirds of the kingdom’s population is under the age 29 while about 50 percent are under 25 years old. These demographic pressures exacerbate the structural deficiencies in areas such as water usage and housing, which are two areas in which Saudi Arabia is confronting severe shortages. There are signs that the difficult economic predicament confronting Saudi youth and other marginalized segments of society has triggered a resort to creative political activism despite the inherent risks of having to navigate a deeply autocratic political space. Among other things, activists are leveraging online social media outlets such as YouTube to showcase their plights to the ruling authorities and audiences beyond the kingdom.

An increasingly complex geopolitical environment also presents Saudi Arabia with a series of pressures. The kingdom’s ongoing tensions with Iran and concerns about a potential rapprochement between Washington and Tehran remain a cause for deep consternation in Riyadh. For Saudi Arabia, an emboldened Iran that is permitted to reengage the world diplomatically and economically, especially in the critical energy sphere, would undermine the kingdom’s influence and diminish its strategic relevance to its main benefactor in Washington.

Tensions between fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, most notably Qatar, over the course of regional unrest in recent years have likewise presented the kingdom with a new set of challenges. The disintegration of Syria and escalating violence in the Egyptian Sinai, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen has also yielded an advancing set of security concerns that threaten the kingdom. There are indications that Daesh has already set its sights on Saudi Arabia in its campaign of expansion.

Conclusion

The collection of challenges that confront King Salman can only be addressed through a program of far-reaching social, political, and economic reforms. But any genuine reforms that aim to open political space, encourage dialogue, and otherwise challenge the kingdom’s current predicament will raise uncomfortable questions over the very legitimacy of Saudi Arabia’s monarchial model. This presents the royal family with an existential dilemma and will continue to impede any attempts to implement genuine change. At the same time, as the luster of the recent transition wears off, it will become quickly apparent once again that Saudi Arabia’s enduring authoritarian model is ill equipped to ensure long-term stability, security, and progress.
China’s Influence in the Persian Gulf

By Abdullah Khurram

The Persian Gulf is located at the epicenter of many regional conflicts and at the heart of global energy politics. China, which has gained significant geopolitical and economic leverage in this oil-rich region in recent years, has therefore cultivated excellent relations with different sides, despite them having tremendous animosity towards each other. Indeed, Beijing has befriended Iran, as well as Sunni Gulf Arab nations that compete with the Islamic Republic as energy powers and geopolitical rivals. However, this gesture of cooperation is not only a recent phenomenon; in fact Chinese-Middle Eastern cooperation actually dates back to Emperor Wu in the Han Dynasty who sent his envoys to both Arab lands and Persia.9 Today, officials in Beijing view this strategy as vital to ensuring China’s energy security irrespective of how Middle Eastern conflicts unfold.

Trade and Investment

Recently, the Chinese government has shown an interest in diversifying its sources of revenue by encouraging exports of services, having announced a target of USD 1 trillion exports by 2020.10 This could give a boost to Chinese companies setting up their businesses within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). For example, multiple companies from China are already establishing their Middle East branches in the UAE’s free zones. As strong financial centers Dubai and Doha also serve as regional hubs for Chinese banks to provide services to their companies in the region.

According to the Ministry of Commerce in China, between 2011 and 2013 Chinese companies won more than USD 4.8 billion in construction contracts in the UAE, which stands as the largest market for Chinese products in the Gulf region.11 Also, China is the world’s third largest importer of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), and its largest supplier, not surprisingly, is Qatar.12

Saudi Arabia remains China’s largest crude oil supplier, exporting 1.1 million barrels per day. The Middle East overall accounts for only 26 percent of U.S. oil imports, yet for China the figure is as high as 60 percent.13 Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) alone exports USD 2 billion worth of plastics, iron, and fertilizers to China each year.14

According to Jon Alterman from the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington D.C., the Gulf countries have also taken advantage of China’s construction boom. For example, the number of aluminum extrusion presses in the Middle East increased from 25 to 85 in 2007 alone.15 Additionally, China has provided health aid in exchange for market access in Yemen. Today, the trade between the two countries surpasses USD 3 billion.16 Needless to say, China is also interested in having good ties with Yemen because of the country’s strategic location opposite to the Horn of Africa.

Security

More recently, China has shown interest in cooperating with the regional countries against Daesh (“Islamic State”). In July of 2014, the group’s self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, referred to the Chinese government as a persecutor of Muslims. Moreover, over 300 Uighur fighters from China are said to have joined Daesh’s ranks. Naturally, Beijing is concerned about the implications of its citizens traveling abroad to fight for international jihadist causes and has every reason to cooperate with the GCC in the fight against Daesh.17
China relies on seaborne shipping for most of its trade. Thus, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has become China’s vital force in protecting the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). To ensure the safety of its ships and its citizens from Somali pirates, Beijing began its anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden in 2008. PLAN forces are said to have combated over 30 potential pirate attacks, in addition to rescuing 40 commercial ships. These operations marked China’s first military mission to ensure international security that was pursued beyond East Asia.

In September 2014, China held joint naval exercises with Iran, which was the first time that Chinese warships sailed in the far flung waters of the Persian Gulf. In the words of Admiral Amir Hossein Azad, commander of Iran’s First Naval Zone, the objective of these exercises was “establishing peace, stability, tranquility and multilateral and mutual cooperation”. Amongst others, the Chinese missile destroyer Changchun and missile frigate Changzhou of the 17th Naval Fleet took part in the drills. An Iranian economist Saeed Laylaz remarked that beyond defense ties these naval exercises show “most of all that the Chinese want to keep their lucrative business relations with Iran.”

Iran is China’s third largest supplier of oil, accounting for 12 percent of China’s total oil demand. Tehran and Beijing aim to boost bilateral trade to USD 200 billion within 10 years time. While ties between the two countries are very warm, any nuclear deal between Iran and the West will increase the Islamic Republic’s bargaining leverage over China. Furthermore, a deal between Iran and the West will also mean that the Obama Administration will have more time and energy to put into issues in Southeast Asia, which does not exactly bode well for China.

China’s Iran policy is certainly an area of contention in its relations with the Arab monarchies of the western Persian Gulf. Moreover, China’s veto of all three Security Council resolutions on Syria even invited a vocal criticism of China from King Abdullah, in the aftermath of which talks of the GCC-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) were stalled. Yet, at the same time, Gulf governments understand the Chinese reasoning of non-intervention in other states’ internal affairs and have calculated that the rise of China cannot be ignored at any cost. For example, during former premier Wen Jiabao’s tour of the Gulf region in 2012, all regional countries expressed their desire to increase mutual cooperation and agreements with China.

China continues to improve its soft power in the region. For example, it has launched an Arabic version of China Today in which there is a specific section known as “We’re all East”. As a result, many in the Gulf view China as the future. According to Telhami-Zogby International poll, respondents ranked China second only after France as the country they would most like to be a superpower in a world with only one superpower.

**China, an American Partner in the Gulf?**

Despite China’s active engagement with all countries in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. shall continue to remain the most important player in the region. In the words of former Chinese Ambassador to Iran Hua Liming, “China will not challenge the presence of the United States in the Middle East,” instead China will “focus on strengthening relations with Middle East countries themselves, such as Iran and Oman, who jointly control the Strait of Hormuz.”

The Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East could indeed serve as a region where the U.S. and China may cooperate effectively. China has tremendously benefitted from Washington’s security commitments to the region. Therefore, it does not plan to rival the U.S. in the Gulf. This cooperation could also enhance U.S.-China mutual confidence, potentially to resolve contentious issues in other areas such as the South China Sea.

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Bahrain Monitor

- Manama steps up military support for multinational campaign against Daesh
- Bahraini authorities launch investigation into main Shi’ite opposition group as anti-government protests held in Manama mark four year anniversary of Bahrain’s “Arab Spring”
- Daesh threatens Bahrain with threats on social media
- Explosion targeting security forces damages mosque
- Government removes pan-Arab news channel following interview with opposition member
- Court sentences three Shi’ites to death for March 2014 attack
- Emir of Qatar visits Manama

February 1

Bombing injures two policemen

Bahraini officials announced that a “terrorist” attack waged in a gas station in Maqasha village, situated west of Manama, wounded two policemen. Authorities attributed the attack to al-Wefaq (Bahrain’s dominant Shi’ite opposition group), yet provided no other details.

Opposition condemns government’s decision to revoke the citizenship of 72 Bahrainis

Al-Wefaq and four other opposition groups issued a joint statementcondemning Manama’s decision several days earlier to strip 72 Bahrainis of their citizenship, maintaining that at least 50 out of the 72 had been targeted for peaceful dissidence. The opposition stated that the total number of Bahraini nationals who lost their citizenship had reached 115.

Government takes Alarab off air on first day of broadcasting

Bahrain’s Information Affairs Authority (IAA) announced that it had suspended Alarab after only several hours because the newly-launched pan-Arab news channel had failed “to take account of efforts aimed at stemming the tide of extremism and terrorism.” The suspension followed an interview with Khalil al-Marzouq, a Bahraini dissident and member of al-Wefaq, the dominant opposition faction. The new channel is owned by Prince Alwaleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia, billionaire nephew of King Salman. The IAA announced that Alarab would resume broadcasting after “technical and administrative” problems had been resolved.

February 5

Gulf Air resumes flights to Baghdad

Bahrain’s national airline Gulf Air announced that it will resume flights to and from Baghdad International Airport. The temporary suspension came after growing concerns about safety and security in the Baghdad area following an incident in January in which an aircraft was fired upon.

February 8

Daesh (“Islamic State”) threatens Bahrain

Within two weeks of authorities in Manama revoking the citizenship of 72 Bahrainis, twenty-two of them joined Daesh and other hardline Sunni Islamist militias operating in Iraq and Syria. One new member warned that he would “enter Bahrain with blazing guns and behead the king.” Others started a trend on Twitter with the hashtag “#Al Khalifa nationality is under my foot.” One in particular, Omar Bozboun, posted a photo of his Bahraini passport underneath his shoe. The caption stated defiantly that Daesh members require no passport and that the group will soon incorporate the Persian Gulf island kingdom into the “caliphate.”

Analysis: It is well known that several prominent Bahraini Sunni clerics have been at the forefront of Daesh since the group conquered Mosul in June 2014 and established a “caliphate” in the heart of the Middle East. Manama’s action illustrates the extent to which the kingdom perceives Daesh as a looming threat. This
development bodes ill for political stability in Bahrain not only because the kingdom is threatened by violent Sunni extremists, but also because the Shi’ite majority continues to challenge the Al Khalifa family’s legitimacy. In sum, Bahrain is likely to be a major flashpoint for the Persian Gulf’s sectarian tensions.

February 9 & 15

**Bahrain provides Jordan with military assistance in struggle against Daesh (“Islamic State”)**

Bahrain’s monarch and the King of Jordan discussed enhanced military cooperation between the two Arab states. King Hamad told his Jordanian counterpart that Bahrain is “proud to provide all the help Jordan needs to combat terrorism and protect Islam from Daesh.”

The General Command of the Bahraini Defense Force declared that Manama will support Amman by providing troops within the framework of the Joint Arab Defense Agreement. The pact, based on the “bonds of kinship and cohesion,” has defined the two Arab monarchies’ relationship throughout history. Bahrain’s state-run news agency, BNA, reported that Manama has deployed war planes to Jordan to “participate in the international effort to annihilate terrorism”.

Analysis: Manama’s increasing military involvement in the fight against Daesh, which has already threatened Bahrain on numerous occasions via messages on Twitter and online propaganda movies. The issue of Bahraini Sunni extremists joining Daesh’s ranks also factors into Bahrain’s support for Jordan. Interestingly, Manama is invoking the Joint Arab Defense Agreement (JADA) as Egypt and the Tobruk-based Libyan government did in the wake of Daesh’s execution of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya. Clearly, Sunni Arab states are becoming increasingly reliant on the use of the JADA to strengthen alliances as the threat of Islamist extremism persists.

February 14

**Protestors mark fourth year anniversary of Bahrain’s “Arab Spring” uprising**

Hundreds of Bahrainis took to Manama’s streets on the four year anniversary of the kingdom’s “Arab Spring.” According to Al Jazeera, Bahrain’s police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the demonstrators, who were calling for the release of Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of al-Wefaq (Bahrain’s dominant Shi’ite opposition group). Bahraini authorities arrested Salman in December 2014.

The kingdom’s public security chief, Major-General Tariq al-Hassan, announced that even the act of soliciting citizens to participate in the protests would be considered criminal. He warned that citizens must “stay away from the disruptive activities that might affect security or public order.” Al-Hassan continued, “Action [will be] taken against those who spread terror among citizens or residents, put the safety of others at risk or try to disrupt the nation’s security and stability.”

February 17

**Government opens a criminal investigation against al-Wefaq**

Manama’s probe into the dominant opposition group came after authorities accused it of posting “criminal content” on the internet. Specifically, the public prosecutor accused al-Wefaq of inciting “hatred against the ruling system and circulating false news to undermine civil peace and national security”. In response, al-Wefaq condemned the investigation, claiming that it intended to “end legitimate opposition and [that it] refutes [government] claims of democracy.” The group accused authorities of relying on “the judiciary to punish any political action.”
February 18

**Personal representative of Qatar’s emir visits Bahrain**

Bahrain’s Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa invited Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani, who represents the Emir of Qatar, to Manama. Bahrain’s Crown Prince, Deputy Supreme Commander and First Deputy Premier, Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, also met with the Qatari diplomat. Their meeting focused on areas in which bilateral relations can improve.36

February 23

**Homemade bomb explodes in mosque**

The Interior Ministry reported that a bomb exploded in a Muqsha village mosque, situated west of Manama, and that no casualties resulted. According to the public prosecutor’s office, seven individuals suspected of terrorist activity in 2014 were apprehended in the explosion’s aftermath. Bahraini officials interrogated a “terrorist cell that specialized in explosive projectiles and devices that can be detonated from afar,” yet they did not identify the members who were arrested, nor did they state when a trial may be held.37

February 26

**Lebanese official seeks to mend ties with Manama following Hezbollah’s remarks**

During a conference in Bahrain, Lebanon’s tourism minister Michel Pharaon stated that his government respects Bahrain’s “sovereignty, independence, and stability” and supports “strengthening the historic relations” between Lebanon and Bahrain “on the basis of non-interference by any country in the internal affairs of the other country.” In response to the tension that resulted from Hezbollah’s leader calling Bahraini authorities “tyrannical and oppressive,” Pharaon sought to distinguish Hezbollah’s statement from “Lebanon’s official position” while emphasizing the need for “good relations and Arab solidarity in the face of dangers and challenges.”38

February 26 & 27

**Bahraini court sentences three citizens to death and seven to life in prison**

On February 26, the Supreme Criminal Court sentenced three Bahraini Shi’ites to death for allegedly killing three police officers (including one from the UAE) in March 2014 at an anti-government demonstration in Daih village, near Manama. Three received death sentences and other seven were issued life sentences.39

On February 27, Abbas al-Same (one of the convicted Bahrainis on death row) sent an online video message from prison calling on his fellow Bahrainis to continue opposing the Al Khalifa family. After his message was delivered, protests erupted in the island of Sitra (known as the heart of the anti-government movement) and other villages. Security forces dispersed the crowds with tear gas and rubber bullets, according to Iran’s state-run news agency PressTV.40

Kuwait Monitor

- U.S. deploys 4,000 troops to Kuwait
- Foreign Ministry considers taking military action in Yemen

February 11

**Lawmakers question reason for sweeping blackout**

After a blackout extinguished lights across the oil-rich nation, including the international airport, lawmakers questioned the cause of the incident. Minister of Public Works, Electricity and Water, Abdulaziz al-Ibrahim, stated that a technical failure associated with the transmission line at the al-Subbyia power station caused the sudden outage.41
February 15

**Washington to deploy over 4,000 troops to Kuwait**

*The Associated Press* reported that the U.S. intends to deploy over 4,000 soldiers in the Gulf Arab nation, where they will constitute one of the largest U.S. ground forces in the Middle East. The move came after President Barack Obama asked the U.S. Congress for the option of deploying military force against Daesh militants (or any “closely related successor entity”) for up to three years, in response to the group’s acts against U.S. nationals. Many of the 4,000 U.S. soldiers are veterans of previous deployments in Iraq between 2003 and 2011.

February 18

**Kuwait considers military action in Yemen**

The *Arab Times* reported that Kuwait’s Foreign Ministry indicated that if the UN Security Council authorizes the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to employ military force in Yemen, Kuwait would consider participation in such efforts. The Kuwaitis’ role would likely be limited to one that is logistical or humanitarian.

February 22

**Opposition figure receives a two-year jail sentence for insulting the Emir of Kuwait**

An appeals court sentenced Musallam al-Barrak, a former member of parliament, to two years in jail for insulting Kuwait’s monarch. The defense lawyers stated their intention to appeal the ruling to Kuwait’s highest court. In 2013, a court found Barrak guilty of insulting the Emir of Kuwait when he delivered a speech the previous year in which he referred to the emir’s “autocratic rule.”

February 26

**The identity of “Jihadi John” is revealed**

Souad Mekhennet, a contributor to the *Washington Post*, reported that the identity of “Jihadi John” – a member of Daesh infamous for numerous beheadings of western victims and for his messages delivered in various propaganda videos – has been confirmed. He is Mohammed Emwazi, a Kuwaiti reportedly raised in a “well-to-do” family in West London, who received a degree in computer programming.

**Oman Monitor**

- **Foreign Minister speaks to CNN about regional issues facing Oman**
- **Muscat assists in U.S. evacuation of its diplomatic mission in destabilized Yemen**
- **Iraq’s Foreign Minister visits Oman**

**February 2**

**Foreign Minister talks to CNN about regional security dilemmas facing Oman and the greater Middle East**

CNN published the transcript of an interview in which Oman’s foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi responded to questions regarding the situation in Yemen as well as Oman’s strategy for protecting the Gulf Arab nation from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Alawi stressed that the threat of instability in Yemen spilling into Oman has been ongoing for many years and that authorities in Muscat are taking steps to enhance border security. When asked about the talks between the so-called “P5+1” (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) and Iran, Alawi expressed optimism that both sides would reach a deal in 2015. When questioned about Muscat’s foreign policy doctrine, he said Oman is determined to have wars be “disappeared” in the Middle East and other regions.

Analysis: Alawi’s CNN interview showcases the Omani foreign policy perspective on recent developments in the region. Oman, which believes that it holds a special place in the Middle East, views threats differently than do its Gulf Arab neighbors, most notably Saudi Arabia. The sultanate’s geographic proximity to Iran,
as well as the fact that it is neither a Sunni nor majority-Shi’ite nation (the majority of Omani practice Ibadi Islam), largely drive Muscat’s ‘forward’ and ‘mature’ approach to bridging the gap between the West and the other GCC states on one hand, and the Islamic Republic on the other. Furthermore, Oman is emboldened by its special relationship with Iran. Sultan Qaboos played a crucial role in bringing the Americans and Iranians to the negotiating table throughout 2012 and 2013. Should the P5+1 and Iran reach a successful nuclear agreement, Oman’s unique brand of foreign policy will be credited with contributing to stability in a region beset by warfare.

February 9

**Iraqi Foreign Minister hails Oman’s role in region on visit to Muscat**

While in Muscat, Iraq’s Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Ashaiker al-Jaafari told *Times of Oman* that Iraq is interested in fostering stronger ties with Oman, not only on a political level, but on an economic and commercial level as well. Al-Jaafari was visiting the Gulf Arab nation for the inauguration of Iraq’s new embassy in Oman. Al-Jaafari praised Oman for being a moderate and neutral country that has helped bring stability to parts of the Middle East. The Iraqi official stated, “Given the pioneering role of Oman in the region we can invest in these relations with Iraq’s role to have better relations and a better status quo in the Middle East. The moderate position that Oman has taken in its political relations has given Oman an opportunity to deal with all the countries in the region, even those countries that disagree between themselves.” Al-Jaafari visited the Gulf Arab nation for the inauguration of Iraq’s new embassy in Oman, which he said “proves Iraq’s intention and desire to strengthen the relations between the two countries, in addition to Iraq’s willingness to develop the relations between the two countries and have an effective role in these relations, not only on the political level but on the economic and commercial level.”

**February 11**

**Muscat assists the U.S. to evacuate its diplomatic mission in Yemen**

As Yemen’s developing crisis continued to wreak havoc across the country, Sultan Qaboos ordered his government to help Washington evacuate its diplomatic mission in Yemen. The Foreign Affairs Ministry reported that the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) sent in one plane to accomplish the transfer of U.S. personnel to Oman. The evacuees left Oman that same day to return to the U.S.

The U.S. embassy in Oman credited Muscat for the swift and safe departure of U.S. government personnel from Sana’a and expressed deep appreciation for the Sultan’s unwavering friendship.48

**February 22**

**High ranking Omani official discusses Muscat’s energy policies**

Salim al Aufi, Oman’s undersecretary of the oil and gas ministry, announced that the Gulf Arab nation will produce 980,000 barrels per day (bpd), marking a four percent increase from 2013. Al-Aufi declared, “It’s crucial that we continue the seismic activities and the exploration activities because when the market turns around, we need to have these opportunities identified and ready to go.”

Al-Aufi went on to express his opinion that the oil price “probably did” bottom out and that Oman has no intention of joining the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a cartel that controls approximately two-fifths of global crude oil output. The Omani official emphasized Muscat’s interest in remaining the Middle East’s largest non-OPEC oil-producing country. “If you’re a member of OPEC then you will follow… We like to stay independent as much as possible unless we can influence the decision that will be taken by whatever organization.”
Al-Aufi also referenced the 2014 agreement between Oman and Iran to build a USD 1 billion pipeline to transfer Iranian natural gas from the South Pars field to Oman. “The intentions are still there, that at some point in time we start importing gas from Iran.”

Qatar Monitor

- Tensions heighten with Egypt over accusations that Doha backs Islamist forces in Libya
- Emir visits Washington to meet with President Obama
- Conflicting reports surface concerning Rafale warplane purchase

February 15

Qataris march to protest the killing of three Muslim-American students in North Carolina

In Doha, roughly 1,000 people participated in a march to protest the “terrorist act” that resulted in the death of three Muslim-Americans in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Protesters held banners that read “End of hate crimes”, “Unity”, and “We all have the right to live free from hate.” A foundation chaired by Sheikh Mozabint Nasser al-Masnad, the mother of Qatar’s Emir, organized the demonstration. The U.S. ambassador to Qatar, Dana Shell Smith, participated in the protest and commended the demonstrators’ rejection of hatred in a Twitter message.

Egyptian court charges Mohammed Morsi with leaking sensitive information to Qatar

Egypt’s judicial authorities charged the country’s ousted Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi with undermining national security by providing secret documents to Qatar. According to the public prosecutor, Morsi’s aides leaked documents pertaining to Egypt’s military weapons to Qatari intelligence officials, along with sensitive information about Cairo’s foreign and domestic policies.

February 17

Conflicting reports about Rafale warplane purchase

Reuters reported that, according to an anonymous French official, Paris has entered the “final stage” of negotiations to sell roughly three dozen Rafale warplanes to the Persian Gulf emirate. The firm involved, Dassault Aviation, provided no comment. However, an official in the French Defense Ministry denied the Reuters report.

February 18-20

Events in Libya reverse the thaw in Qatari-Egyptian relations and create political dilemma for the GCC

On February 18, a Qatari diplomat spoke at an Arab League meeting and criticized Egypt for taking unilateral military action in Libya without consulting neighboring states. Egyptian representative Abdel Tarek fired back and accused Doha of sponsoring terrorism in North Africa. That same day an article, entitled “The Triangle of the Forces of Evil Spreads Chaos and Destruction”, was published on the front page of Al Ahram (a popular Egyptian newspaper). The article accused Qatar, along with the U.S. and Turkey, of forming an alliance aimed at destabilizing Egypt. Doha subsequently recalled its ambassador from Cairo. The Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared, “Qatar should not be mentioned as a reason for any failure by the Egyptian government.” In response, Qatar recalled its ambassador to Egypt, marking a reversal in the thaw between both Arab nations that began late last year when Qatari intelligence officials met their Egyptian counterparts in Cairo.

On February 19, the GCC condemned the Egyptian officials’ accusation against Doha and defended the Qatars. The Council’s Secretary General, Abdul Latif al-Zayani, tweeted that Cairo’s allegation was “a false accusation that defies the truth and ignores the sincere efforts that Qatar exerts to fight terrorism and extremism at all levels... These accusations do not help to consolidate Arab solidarity at a time when our
Arab countries are subjected to major challenges to their security, stability and sovereignty.”

On February 20, al-Zayani issued another message on Twitter, emphasizing the GCC’s support for Egypt’s efforts, including Cairo’s recent actions in Libya, to combat extremism and terrorism in the region. The statement went further, claiming that the Gulf Arab monarchies’ security depends on security and stability in Egypt. Nothing in this statement made any mention of the tension between Qatar and Egypt that resulted from the Arab League’s meeting two days earlier. The message from the previous day had been deleted. According to the New York Times, “The turnabout raised questions about possible discord or confusion within the organization, and about what appeared to be signs of reconciliation after a long dispute over Egypt between Qatar and its neighbors.”

Analysis: The GCC’s struggle to formulate a coherent policy toward Libya burst to the fore during the aftermath of the Arab League meeting. Unquestionably, GCC unity is being severely tested over relations with Egypt and its response to Daesh’s advances in the beleaguered state of Libya. King Salman’s ascent to the throne may be altering the GCC’s calculus vis-à-vis Egypt. Analysts maintain that Riyadh has cut off funding to Cairo while becoming closer to Doha. This shift irks the UAE, dedicated to including Egypt in any GCC actions, whether military, political, or economic. Al-Zayani’s statement is intended to signal that the GCC is united behind Egypt, even if divisions exist behind the scenes.

February 24

Emir visits President Obama

Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited President Obama at the White House. Obama praised the emirate as a “strong partner” of the U.S. in the struggle against Daesh (“Islamic State”), stating that Washington and Doha are both “committed to making sure that [Daesh] is defeated, to making sure that in Iraq there is an opportunity for all people to live together in peace.” The Emir hailed his nation’s alliance with the U.S. and emphasized the importance of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The two leaders also discussed ongoing crises in Libya and Yemen.

Analysis: The Emir of Qatar’s visit to Washington featured meetings with key foreign and defense policy-makers, including former U.S. President George H. W. Bush. These meetings were intended to clear the air of animosity over Doha’s alleged support for Islamist extremists, including Daesh, and to discuss Qatar’s role in multilateral counter-terrorism operations. Certain voices in the GCC posit that the U.S. and Qatar share an interest in cultivating ties with ‘moderate’ Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). This does not play well with Egypt and the UAE, which both identify the MB as a “terrorist organization.”

FIFA moves the 2022 World Cup to November/December

Top FIFA officials met in Doha and decided to shift the 2022 World Cup from the traditional summer months to November/December, thereby avoiding harm to both players and spectators from temperatures that can reach 120ºF. Reportedly, the English Premier League may demand concessions for possible disruptions to its schedule and that of its media partners.

February 26

Emir of Qatar: Doha is committed to Egypt’s “stability”

Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani spoke about his nation’s foreign policy at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. With regard to Egypt, the emir stated that Qatar is committed to “stability” in Egypt despite differences between the two governments. “We have differences with [Cairo] but we all agree that [Egypt’s] government has to be stable.”
Saudi Arabia Monitor

- Riyadh leads the GCC in formulating a unified response to tumult in Yemen
- King Salman appoints new members to Shura Council
- Emir of Qatar and a high-ranking Omani official meet King Salman in Riyadh

February 10

Saudi Arabia beheads a Syrian convicted of drug smuggling

Marking the kingdom’s 27th execution in 2015, Abdullah Mohammed al-Ahmad al-Anzi, a Syrian national convicted of trafficking illegal pills, was executed in Saudi Arabia’s northwestern Jawf region.59

February 12

Former Saudi Arabian official hints that the kingdom may adopt a softer policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)

In an interview with the Riyadh-based Rotana television channel, Ahmed al-Tuwaijri, a former member of the Consultative Assembly, stated that it was “completely unreasonable” for the Saudi Arabian government to label the MB a terrorist organization, as it did in 2014. Tuwaijri went further by identifying the MB as a “nation” that is Saudi Arabia’s “natural ally.” The former official pointed to Riyadh’s relationships with the Moroccan and Tunisian governments, where the local MB political wings hold power in coalition governments, and with Turkey, where the ruling Justice and Development Party is frequently identified as a de facto MB party and sponsor of the international movement. “The kingdom doesn’t have any problem with these groups, and vice versa. They have to be allies and we have to have strategic relationships with them,” declared Tuwaijri.60

Analysis: This interview suggests that a debate is taking place within Saudi Arabia’s ruling monarchy about the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the movement’s role in the Middle East. Perhaps al-Tuwaijri’s comments signal dissent within the kingdom as an outcome of the succession results. Analysts have suggested that he is airing his views because of his unhappiness with the Sudairy take-over of the throne and certain key appointments following the death of King Abdullah. Given that Saudi Arabia has labeled the MB a “terrorist organization”, Riyadh would have to change that stance if any rapprochement between the House of Saud and the Islamist movement could occur. This appears unlikely given that the MB represents a brand of political Islam in which the ballot box legitimizes a ruling class that contradicts the monarchical concept of divine rule. Additionally, the Saudi Arabians are unlikely to easily forgive the MB for siding with Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War (1990/91) and for condemning Riyadh’s alliance with the U.S. against a fellow Arab/Muslim country during that conflict.

Riyadh releases two women detained since December for violating the kingdom’s prohibition on female drivers

The Saudi Arabian government released from jail Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayssa al-Amoudi, as confirmed by al-Hathloul’s lawyer. Al-Amoudi’s husband also confirmed the two women’s release in a communication with The Wall Street Journal.61

Saudi Arabia beheads a Pakistani citizen on drug trafficking charges

Saudi Arabia’s state-run media reported that Babi Hussein Mohammed Ishaq, a Pakistani national, had been beheaded. Ishaq was allegedly guilty of smuggling heroin into the kingdom.62
February 13

**Saudi Arabia evacuates staff from its embassy in conflict-ridden Yemen**

Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry stated that Riyadh would suspend operations in Yemen and evacuate its diplomatic staff from the kingdom’s embassy in Sana’a. The state-run media quoted the foreign ministry: “As a result of deterioration in security and political conditions in the Yemeni capital Sana’a, the kingdom has suspended all embassy operations in Sana’a and evacuated its entire staff, who arrived safely in the kingdom.” Saudi Arabia was the first Arab state to evacuate its embassy in Yemen.

February 14

**GCC holds ministerial meeting in Riyadh to address unrest in neighboring Yemen**

The Saudi Arabian government held a meeting attended by GCC ministers to discuss the challenges that Yemen’s Gulf Arab neighbors face as tumult further destabilizes the country. Qatar’s Foreign Minister Khalid al-Attiyah stated, “Yemen faces the most dangerous challenges since the 2011 revolution, forcing us to act promptly to help its people and prevent the country from descending into chaos and internal fighting threatening its unity and safety.” Al-Attiyah emphasized that Yemen’s future will impact “stability and security in the whole region as the world.”

Analysis: The GCC is attempting to establish a united front vis-à-vis Yemen. Gulf monarchs are signaling their backing for Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, whom the GCC considers to be Yemen’s “legitimate president”, and GCC ambassadors have resumed their duties in Aden instead of in the capital Sana’a. With the partition of Yemen deemed a likely outcome of the current conflict, the GCC cannot be under any illusion that “stability” or “security” will soon become part of the lexicon with respect to Yemen.

February 15

**King Salman appoints seven new Shura Council members**

Saudi Arabian state-run media reported that the king has appointed seven new members to the Shura Council: Dr. Khalid al-Sabti, Dr. Muhammad al-Hiaza, Walid al-Khuraiji, Mohammed al-Sager, Dr. Saad al-Huraiqi, Dr. Nasser al-Daoud, and Abbas Muhammad Hadi.

February 17

**Emir of Qatar visits Saudi Arabia to meet with King Salman**

Saudi Arabia’s King Salman met with Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al-Thani in Riyadh to discuss Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s relationship, Qatar’s relationship with Egypt, and Yemen’s deteriorating security crisis. Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Crown Prince and Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef and Defense Minister Prince Mohammed were also present.

Analysis: King Salman has a reportedly positive relationship with the Emir of Qatar and is seeking to “reset” relations between the two monarchies. Qatar views the Sudairy faction’s return to power as an opportunity to improve a relationship that has known considerable tension, and at times hostility, since the “Arab Spring” uprisings of 2011. At that time, Riyadh and Doha became opposing stakeholders in numerous
Arab countries undergoing political transitions, most notably Egypt. It will be important to follow how Iran factors into Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s efforts to restore friendly ties as negotiations continue between Iran and the P5+1. Despite tensions over conflicting end goals in Syria’s civil war, Qatar has maintained a relatively close relationship with Iran, largely due to Doha and Tehran’s joint ownership of the world’s largest natural gas field, and it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia, under King Salman’s leadership, will be so accommodating to the Islamic Republic on regional issues.

February 23

Authorities investigate a mixed party held near the ‘Holy Capital’

Saudi Arabian authorities launched an investigation into individuals from African nations who held a party near Mecca, in which men and women reportedly celebrated the release of a young woman from prison. Roughly 60 people were present when the raid occurred, yet the majority managed to flee.68

February 24

Report states Riyadh may cooperate with Israel in a potential military strike on Iran

Israel’s Channel 2 reported that Saudi Arabian diplomats told lawmakers in the European Union that Riyadh would be ready to permit Israel’s air force to traverse the kingdom’s airspace in a strike against Iran. The report stated that approval from Saudi Arabia would depend, however, on Israel reaching an agreement with the Palestinians.69

Omani official visits Saudi Arabia for talks with King Salman

King Salman met Oman’s Deputy Premier for Cabinet Affairs, Fahd bin Mahmoud Al Said, in Riyadh to discuss regional security crises and opportunities for the two Gulf Arab nations to enhance bilateral cooperation. The Omani official conveyed Sultan Qaboos’ greetings to the newly enthroned Saudi monarch and expressed his joy to be in Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Muqrin along with other high ranking officials in Riyadh attended the meeting.70

Analysis: According to GCC officials, the meeting between King Salman and the Omani deputy prime minister followed meetings with other GCC royals. During the meeting, Saudi Arabia discussed Oman’s relationship with Iran. Crown Prince Muqrin, now temporarily responsible for foreign affairs, was part of the discourse. Indeed, after a new sultan inherits the throne following the end of Sultan Qaboos’s reign, it will be interesting to observe if Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab governments attempt to pressure Muscat into distancing itself from Tehran. Of course, the mysterious Omani succession was also a point of discussion. As the two states that border Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Oman are likely to find more common ground given their mutual concerns about a prolonged civil war in the southwestern Arabian Peninsula.

Court sentences a man to death for “apostasy”

Saudi Arabian newspapers reported a court ruling for a man who had “denounced his faith” in Hafr al-Batin, a city in northeastern Saudi Arabia. The unnamed individual allegedly uploaded a video of himself defacing a copy of the Koran and striking it with a shoe. An official in Riyadh stated, “In the video he cursed God, Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) and his daughter Fatimah and ripped a copy of the Holy Qur’an and hit it with a shoe... The death sentence was issued after his apostasy was proved.”71

February 25

Brent crude oil futures increase 5 percent following oil minister’s comment on oil demand

Brent April crude LCOc1 surged USD 2.97 to settle at USD 61.63 a barrel after Saudi Arabia oil minister, Ali al-Naimi, stated that global oil demand is rising, largely due to Chinese factory production that is surpassing expectations. Naimi remarked, “Markets are calm now... demand is growing.” Analysts partially attributed the surge to the Saudi Arabian official’s comment.72
February 25-27

**Saudi Arabia and the GCC wage a diplomatic offensive against the Houthis in Yemen**

On February 26, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Said al-Jaber, left Sana’a for the southern port city of Aden, the country’s economic hub (President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi fled to Aden following his escape from Houthi-imposed house arrest in Sana’a on February 21). The Saudi Arabian ambassador’s move to Aden signaled Riyadh’s support for Hadi and its opposition to the Houthis’ rise to power in Sana’a and other regions of Yemen.73

The previous day, the GCC secretary-general Abdul Latif al-Zayani paid a visit to Hadi in Aden, marking the first Arab officials to visit to him in his new location. The Saudi Arabian ambassador was joined by the other GCC ambassadors. Hadi praised the Council, stating that “the visit of Zayani and GCC ambassadors is a token of support for constitutional legitimacy.”74

On February 27, Kuwait and the UAE’s state-run news agencies announced that Kuwait City and Abu Dhabi intend to relocate their ambassadors to Aden. The UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, justified the action on the grounds that his government seeks “to entrench constitutional legitimacy in Yemen, embodied by President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his government.”75

February 26

**U.S. court convicts Saudi Arabian national for role in 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa**

A U.S. court convicted Khalid al-Fawwaz on four charges linked to the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. Fawwaz was transferred from the European Union to the U.S. in 2012 and his trial began in early 2015. According to prosecutors, Fawwaz had a close relationship with Osama bin Laden and led an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan nearly 25 years ago. The trial was focused on this early stage of al-Qaeda’s development as an international terrorist organization.76

**UAE Monitor**

- Abu Dhabi lends diplomatic support to Egypt as it fights Islamist militias in Libya
- UAE strikes Daesh’s oil refineries in Syria
- Ukrainian government signs arms deal with UAE

**February 16**

**UAE strikes the oil refineries of Daesh (“Islamic State”) in Syria**

Emirati fighter jets based in Jordan bombed oil refineries controlled by Daesh. The UAE’s state-run news agency, WAM, reported that F-16s waged a “fresh attack” that “targeted oil refineries controlled by the Daesh organization, with the aim of drying up its sources of finance.” WAM also noted that similar attacks took place on February 10 and 12. However, those locations were not specified.77

**Analysis:** The UAE’s strike against Daesh’s oil facilities came in the wake of revelations from the Pentagon that Daesh was earning considerable amounts of money from oil exports. While the specific locations of the oil facilities are unknown, they are thought to be situated in Syria. The UAE’s F-16s had previously been stationed in Jordan in the aftermath of the fiery death of Jordanian pilot Lieutenant Moaz Kassassbeh. Such a demonstration of force by the UAE signals that the Emiratis will likely be more forward in terms of waging military strikes against Daesh and other Islamist extremists in the Levant.

**UAE leadership expresses support for Egyptian military campaign in Libya**

The UAE’s Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan stated that his government “supports, with all its capabilities, Egypt’s efforts in eradicating terror-
ism and violence directed at its nationals and affirms its position in standing alongside and its complete solidarity with it." Egypt’s bombing campaign in Libya began one day after Daesh in Libya released a video in which it claimed responsibility for beheading 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians who had previously been kidnapped.  

The UAE’s President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan addressed the Egyptian leadership. “We are with and beside you in all steps and measures you take to eradicate terrorism and all terrorist organizations... This ugly crime strengthens our will and determination and reinforces our cooperation with our partners in confronting the criminal threats of Daesh (Islamic State) organization in Libya and to uproot it from the entire region.”

Analysis: The UAE is a strong supporter of both the Egyptian and Tobruk-based Libyan governments. Not only does Abu Dhabi provide financial support to both, but it is a military partner as well. The UAE has been a key driver in Egypt’s quest to defend itself from Daesh fighters in the Sinai and Libya. Last year, the UAE Presidential Guard, along with Egyptian Special Operation Forces, conducted cross-border raids into Libya, and Abu Dhabi and Cairo cooperated in waging airstrikes against Islamist militants in Libya. Now that Daesh has lured Egypt into a direct confrontation, the UAE is expected to back Egypt for the long haul. Clearly, the barbaric brutality of Daesh is generating a stronger strategic and tactical alliance between the UAE and Egypt. Similar alliances will likely emerge across the Middle East and North Africa.

February 24 & 27

UAE signs “Letters of Intent” with Ukraine

Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko signed a deal to purchase weapons from Abu Dhabi. The Ukrainian president announced, “We are in a very practical dialogue, and we hope in the very near future, we have a decision to help us attain defensive weapons.” Poroshenko met with the UAE’s crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Reportedly, the two discussed other aspects of relations, including investment and the banking sector. However, on February 27, the UAE stated that Abu Dhabi and Kiev’s military and security cooperation agreement does not include a weapons deal.

Analysis: According to Emirati officials, Poroshenko’s announcement of a weapons deal was highly overblown. Apparently the Ukraine president misspoke to reporters about his visit to Abu Dhabi’s IDEX 2015, the Middle East’s largest defense exhibition. Nevertheless, agreements were signed with regard to cooperation in the spheres of food, energy, and defense. UAE interlocutors claim that the agreements were “Letters of Intent” as opposed to actual agreements. Poroshenko’s visit surprised the Russian delegation to IDEX 2015 because of Abu Dhabi and Moscow’s close cooperation on various defense and economic projects. Regardless of Poroshenko’s intent, his visit shook up the regional chessboard. Some analysts argue that the UAE is trying to strike a “balancing” act between Kiev and Moscow in order to send a message to the Kremlin about Russia and Iran’s growing partnership.

February 24

UAE holding company signs a USD 235 million contract with Oshkosh Corp

Emirates Advanced Research and Technology Holding of the UAE signed a USD 235 million contract with the Wisconsin-based firm, which will provide the Gulf Arab state technical support for the 750 mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles that it sold Abu Dhabi two years earlier.
Endnotes


78. *Ibid*.


