

President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria signals the end of US support for the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance which sought to counter Iran's strategic advances in the Middle East. Their decades-long effort received a major boost in 2017, when Trump threw his support behind his two GCC partners, pulled the US out of the JCPOA and re-imposed oil sanctions on Iran. But a series of missteps by the Gulf states and Trump's reluctance to commit US forces to backing up anti-Iran rhetoric have left their "counter revolutionary" strategy in disarray.

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On top of failing to act against escalating attacks in the Gulf, the US's withdrawal from Syria in October has confirmed fears held by his close regional partners that the US is unwilling to help them counter Iran's gains in the region. In spite of all the promise of strategic ties and rapprochement between Trump's administration, Saudi Arabia and the UAE since 2017, the reality remains that the US is bereft of any effective strategy to push back against moves made on the ground by Iran's "resistance axis," and that its long-term regional plans will continue to contradict the hope held in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that the US would back their rise to regional security preeminence.

Even more concerning for the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE is the pragmatic belief held by some in Washington that the US will need to accommodate revisionist powers like Iran, Russia and [Turkey](#) as part of a prudent foreign policy embracing multilateralism and manifesting goodwill to such powers.

Regional conflicts, disputes and hawkish foreign policy enhance Iran's influence

The first debilitating misstep in curbing Iran's influence in the Middle East was the invasion of Yemen in 2015. Not only did the intervention result in thousands of Yemeni civilians without achieving its main objective of dislodging the Houthi rebels from power, it also severely stretched the military and financial resources of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and undermined their global credibility.

Moreover, the conflict exposed both countries' oil and gas infrastructure and civilian centres to counterattacks, raising global fears over the security of oil and gas supplies, and giving Iran an entrance into the politics of the Arabian Peninsula and an effective proxy for asymmetric attacks

against the GCC states.

The Saudi and UAE [economic blockade of Qatar](#) two years later also led to unintended consequences. While the embargo was extremely destabilizing for parts of Qatar's economy, especially the banking sector, it quickly adapted to isolation and emerged from the crisis more resilient. The embargo prompted Qatar to shore up its defenses by bringing in troops from Turkey and seeking moral support from Iran. The Saudi-UAE action may have been less bloody than the Yemen invasion, but it also served to deeply divide the GCC and enhance the influence of Iran in the region.

But it was the election of Donald Trump the previous year which arguably had the most explosive and far-reaching consequences.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's verbal encouragement of the new US administration's hawkish approach to Iran, which dovetailed with Israeli support, led to the US pull out from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of sanctions on buyers of Iran's oil exports. However, the US administration and its Gulf supporters underestimated Iran's determination to fight the sanctions. A graduated set of actions by Tehran or its regional proxies – first with the seizure of oil tankers and second by strikes against shipping and oil assets – raised the risks for the Gulf producers and their customers, especially in Asia, and the global economy.

The Gulf countries also failed to anticipate Trump's lack of resolve to deter Iran from using further force. His [unwillingness to retaliate against Iran's escalating attacks](#) and his surprising call for talks with Tehran after the strikes on Saudi oil infrastructure revealed an ignorance of the fickleness of current US foreign policy and its growing incoherence in furthering US allies' objectives.

US-Iran impasse has implications for Gulf security and oil markets

Washington's inaction may have prevented more violence in the region in the short term, but it has also sent a signal, intentionally or otherwise, that its commitment to Gulf security is wavering. This, coupled with uncertainty over Iran's next move, has created more oil supply insecurity and created serious roadblocks for Gulf countries' attempts to improve future economic growth prospects and stability.

Most unnerving to the Gulf suppliers was the global oil markets' response to the oil infrastructure

attacks. The muted price increase in the wake of the strikes reflected sufficient alternative supply sources elsewhere in the world and exposed the diminishing strategic importance of Gulf oil, at least for now.

Security concerns could also undermine efforts by national oil companies [Saudi Aramco and ADNOC to secure captive refining assets in Asia](#) and elsewhere. Furthermore, it may deter investors from participating in their respective [initial public offering plans](#) at precisely the time Saudi Arabia is making a renewed push to attract global investors into its economy as part of Vision 2030, and the UAE is seeing the biggest decline in its stock and property market since the financial crisis in 2008.

In addition, a wavering US has led GCC countries to hedge their bets on the security front.

In the wake of the attacks on its oil assets, Saudi Arabia took up an Iraqi offer to open back channels with Iran, while the UAE foreign minister travelled to Moscow seeking Russian assistance in mediating with Iran. In mid-October the UAE and the kingdom took turns to host Russian President Vladimir Putin, signing a raft of [business deals, mainly in the oil and gas](#) sectors.

In the final analysis, it could be argued that Russia, rather than Iran, is the main beneficiary of the US and GCC missteps. The country is poised to play a more important strategic role in the Persian Gulf, something the British in the 19th and early twentieth century, and the US after the second World War, strove to prevent.

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