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The death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sparked immediate speculations over how his successor, Salman, would navigate multiple foreign policy challenges presented by an increasingly volatile region. Although Salman has taken on increasing responsibilities since appointed crown prince in 2012, the new king is expected to keep a majority of the existing cabinet in place while maintaining a high level of oil production as part of a concerted effort to project stability through the continuity of Abdullah's recent signature policies. Salman, however, is left with little choice but to establish an effective working relationship with U.S. President Barack Obama as his top foreign policy priority. Next, he will have to address the latest political crisis in Yemen, triggered by emboldened Houthi militiamen who forced President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his cabinet to resign on Thursday last week; the Houthis have controlled key parts of the capital of Sanaa since September last year.

Yemen, A major challenge

Although the Houthis, a Shiite sect, have been seen as a threat for much of the last decade, Saudi Arabia has now come to perceive them as an even greater strategic threat at its fragile border. The group, which some in Saudi Arabia and Yemen allege is supported by Iran, controls a number of northwestern border provinces, including Saada, al-Jawf, and Hajjah, as well as swaths of land in Amran Province. Meanwhile, the Houthi rebels, who see themselves as politically marginalized in Sunni-majority Yemen, allegedly are pushing for access to the Red Sea—in a bid to consolidate their regional presence and arguable semi-autonomy—and Riyadh fears that Tehran seeks to expand its regional influence by inflaming tribal and sectarian tensions along the strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red

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Sea to the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis, for their part, see Wahhabi-sponsored groups residing along the border as a significant threat to their religious practices. To complicate matters, Al-Qaeda affiliated groups increasingly capable of orchestrating hit-and-run attacks across Yemen present an additional threat to Saudi Arabia's fragile southern border; this come as Saudi Arabia is already fighting the Islamic State group, another Jihadist organization, holding onto large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq.

Obama and Salman Open a new Chapter

Acknowledging King Salman's daunting challenges as he seeks to project a stable Saudi Arabia to his Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies; to global energy markets and to the international community in particular; President Obama announced that he would cut his India trip short to meet with Salman to discuss issues likely to range from Yemen to regional anti-terrorism cooperation and his administration's nuclear negotiations with Iran. President Obama's upcoming visit to Riyadh will be his second this year as he has made concerted efforts to repair relations after he chose not to strike Syria for its use of chemical weapons against civilians in 2013, leaving Riyadh to doubt the president's resolve and commitment to Middle East security.

With President Obama and King Salman's apparent determination to start a new chapter by seeking to forge an effective working relationship, the new monarch also knows that he cannot afford to entangle himself in Yemen with its chronic problems ranging from extreme poverty to terrorism, but will have to continue to rely on President Obama's signature drone strike policies, which appear to have been particularly effective in Yemen. With these constraints, King Salman's next step is likely to call for "Arab unity" by seeking to revitalize the fractured GCC alliance.

GCC Politics

2014 proved to be a particularly challenging year for the GCC, with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates withdrawing their respective ambassadors from Qatar over Doha's support for regional Islamist groups, including for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. To complicate matters, Oman's independent foreign policy as witnessed by its ability to facilitate the present nuclear interim agreement

between Tehran and Washington while publicly rebuffing Saudi efforts to establish a GCC-union, raised additional questions about the alliance's viability.

While much of last year's inter-GCC squabbles were related to Qatar's quest for an independent foreign policy, the Saudi-Qatari rift was also partly triggered by Riyadh's inability to redefine its strategic partnership with Washington over converging policies on Syria and Iran: Within this context, Saudi Arabia found its strategic maneuverability limited, therefore seeking to influence events where it could by demanding that its GCC allies comply with its foreign policy priorities. This explains last year's uncharacteristic decision to withdraw its ambassador from Qatar while publicly scolding Qatar for its "support of terrorism." Despite the initial obstacles triggered by Doha's support for regional Islamist groups, including in Yemen, King Abdullah and Qatar's new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, were eventually able to patch up differences, which leaves Salman in a unique position to build on his predecessor's gains.

Between the many weak post-Arab Spring governments, coupled with the rapid - and brutal - rise of the Islamic State, King Salman's abilities to shape regional events on his own are limited. However, provided he does not attempt to coerce the smaller GCC states into adopting Saudi foreign policy priorities, a revitalized alliance is within reach if Salman is able to develop some consensus on key issues ranging from Syria, Iran, and how to battle Islamic extremism. For Salman to do so, a first, but critical step would be to find some sort of an arrangement with Oman on Iran: While Sultan Qaboos of Oman has been on the forefronts of attempting to usher in warmer relations between Tehran and Washington, he has also maintained close defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia, his GCC allies and Western powers as part of an effort to secure Oman's independence.

Although Qaboos helped lift Iran out of its regional isolation by facilitating the present interim agreement, he is also fully aware of Iran's attempts to drive a wedge between the country's enemies and reduce tensions between Tehran and several of the Gulf states. First, Tehran exploited existing differences between some of the smaller Gulf states and Saudi Arabia to prevent them from forming a united front against Iran by attempting to convince them that times are changing and they

are better off having good relations with Iran. The main goal was to isolate Saudi Arabia, which is Iran's most significant ideological and religious competitor, the main sponsor of Iran's enemies across the world, and the only country in the Gulf region with the economic and military wherewithal to take on the Islamic Republic.

Despite Qaboos' outreach to Tehran, he is weary of the possibility of a total breakdown of the nuclear talks between Tehran and Washington, which would likely force him to reevaluate his Iran policy and move closer to Saudi Arabia without adopting its harsh stance on Iran. Should Salman be able to capitalize on Oman's neutral approach to Iran, it could help him revitalize the GCC to help protect the stability of the Gulf region from regional turmoil.

While Saudi Arabia is reportedly erecting a massive fence along its border with Iraq to prevent any possible infiltration of its territory by Islamic State group militants, Salman is left with little choice but to rely on the U.S-led coalition to fight off the Jihadists. President Obama, for his part, is left with practically no choice but to continue his military campaign against IS as failure to do so would have long ranging consequences on the stability of the Gulf region, which would adversely impact energy supplies for world markets.

