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Saudi Arabia and Iran: Is trouble brewing?

We ask if calls for a closer union between Gulf states are part of a broader strategy to counter Iran's influence.

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Bahrain has summoned Iran's charge d'affaires to protest against what it calls a "gross violation of its sovereignty", after Tehran criticised efforts by Gulf Arab states to forge a closer political and military union.

The proposed union calls for economic, political and military integration.

The latest Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) meeting ended with no decision, but this did not stop Iran from hardening its tone, calling on Iranians to protest on Friday against what it described as a US plot to annex Bahrain.

Analysts say a closer union between Gulf states is part of a much broader defence strategy to counter Iran's influence.

Last year's 'Arab Spring' protests found their way to Bahrain in early February, with the Shia majority complaining of discrimination by the Sunni royal family and the security forces.

It did not take long for Saudi Arabia to react. In March, it led 1,500 Gulf troops into Bahrain to "help secure government installations".

It was the first time the soldiers from the GCC nations had intervened in another member state.

Iran described this as an "unacceptable" presence of foreign troops in Bahrain, while the Bahraini royal family accused Iran of supporting the mass protests.

Bahrain then recalled its ambassador to Tehran in protest at what it called "blatant interference" in its internal affairs.

Fast forward just over a year, and Iran is now calling for demonstrations against the Saudi-Bahrain unity proposal.

Ali Larijani, the speaker of Iran's parliament, reportedly said: "If Bahrain is supposed to be integrated into another country, it must be Iran and not Saudi Arabia."

Inside Story asks: Now that Saudi Arabia is again talking up the idea of a full union of Gulf states, is it once more trying to show Iran that it will not be messed with? And what is the latest escalation in tensions between the two regional heavyweights likely to achieve?

Joining presenter David Foster to answer these questions are guests: Abdel Aziz Abu Hamad Aluwaisheg, the assistant secretary-general for Negotiations and Strategic Dialogue at the Gulf Cooperation Council; Sadegh Zibakalam, a political science professor at Tehran University, a political analyst and an expert on Iranian foreign policy; Mustafa Alani, the director of the National Security and Terrorism Studies Department at the Gulf Research Center; and Saeed al-Shehabi, a Bahraini opposition activist and member of the Bahrain Freedom Movement.