

Can We Speak of a New Regional Order Driven by the Gulf States after the Arab Spring?

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This contribution takes stock of the motives and goals of the Gulf Cooperation Council's new interventionist regional diplomacy. Such a dynamic is emblematic of the changes occurring since the wave of Arab Spring movements in 2011 and Iran's comeback in the regional and international arenas with the signature of the Iranian nuclear programme agreement on 14 July 2015.

Since the creation of the regional and intergovernmental organism of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on 25 May 1981 at the Abu Dhabi summit, which brought together the six Arab monarchs of the peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar), Saudi Arabia has played a pivotal role. Its central role in the pact has never been contested, although it inspires fear and mistrust among its members.

Born of the fear generated in the region by Iran following the ouster of its Shah, who played the role of regional policeman, the advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran followed by the war pitting it against Iraq (1980-1988) were at the origin of the GCC's creation. Regional threats like Iran, the perception of which is not homogeneous (Oman has excellent relations with Iran, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Abu Dhabi), and regional crises (the Gulf War in 1991 and the Arab revolts

since 2011) constitute the basis for this regional structure. This pact, which is the most long-lived in the Arab world, has been strengthened as regional threats and troubles are exacerbated. Riyadh has been at its heart for over 35 years in an attempt to maintain the political status quo.

What Does the New GCC Interventionist Diplomacy Consist of?

The Gulf States' diplomatic activism in the Middle East is nothing new. The Saudi kingdom's considerable weight in the Arab-Islamic arena and the die-hard activism of Qatar under Emir Hamad (1995-2013), based on a policy of mediation and dialogue, are emblematic.

It is the revolts in Egypt, and particularly in Bahrain – where the uprising of the Shiite community threatened the survival of the Sunni dynastic regime, a minority in the face of over 60% Shiite nationals –, together with the Syrian and Yemeni crises, that have led to the Gulf States' unprecedented interventionism, also intended as a response to Iran's increased interventionism and the decline of American leadership in the Middle East under the Obama administration.

The more aggressive diplomacy by the GCC, structured around the Saudi-Emirates binomial embodying the regional pact's 'hard power,' emerged in a confused, often competing and disorganized manner. Financial and religious 'soft power' was substituted by a hybrid interventionism combining unilateral or multilateral military action with humanitarian and financial aid.

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These were separate interventions whose various goals were not derived through joint agreement within the GCC:

- In Syria, since the summer of 2011, Qatar has been defending the interests of an opposition dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia wishes to destroy the Damascus-Tehran axis and has been supporting anyone who can undo it, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been funding Syrian refugee camps and hospitals in Jordan;²
- In Bahrain, on 14 March 2011, in the guise of a military campaign under the banner of the GCC and its combined military force, the Peninsula Shield, only Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi³ sent troops in order to tell Tehran that there is a red line, while the other member states expressed their solidarity in principle;
- In Yemen, the war that started with an Arab-Sunni coalition on 26 March 2015 was a Saudi decision supported by Abu Dhabi and backed with more or less enthusiasm by the rest of the GCC, with the exception of Oman, true to its principle of neutrality;
- And in Libya, Qatar and the UAE participated in March 2011 in NATO strikes, based on the prescriptive doctrine of the responsibility to protect, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005 and consisting of deploying military intervention on a humanitarian basis.⁴

Nonetheless, when Abu Dhabi intervened in Libya at the side of President Sisi beginning in August 2014 as part of Operation Libya Dawn, it was with a logic of eradicating Islamist groups. By the same token, when Riyadh and Doha emphasize their responsibility of protecting the Syrian population against Bashar el-Assad's regime, which is bombarding the population, this humanitarian-military interventionism is above all motivated by the act of countering Iran and its powerful proxy, Hezbollah,

protectors of the Assad regime. For Qatar,⁵ the financial motivation – in view of its significant investments in Syria designed to pipe its liquefied natural gas to Europe – is a relevant factor in its military interventionism, the antithesis of its mediation diplomacy.

The Saudi Temptation to Spearhead the Counter-Revolution – the Main Reason behind the GCC's Interventionism?

The Gulf regimes are not feeling the Arab Spring effect due to the phenomenon of “revolt saturation” being experienced by some populations, with the notable exception of Bahrain, whose dynasty has since been undergoing a serious political legitimacy crisis.⁶ Tension in countries in transition (Tunisia, Egypt) and the deadlock in conflicts (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya) incite the ruling elites to outdo one another in qualifying the situations as chaos.

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Saudi Arabia has assumed the role of leader of the reaction to the Arab revolts, though taking care to do so in the name of the GCC pact. The other monarchies willingly interact under the counter-revolutionary flag. Even Qatar, so quick to follow its own

² Fatiha DAZI-HÉNI. “Les diplomaties des monarchies du Conseil de coopération du Golfe dans la crise syrienne,” *Confluences Méditerranée : La tragédie syrienne*, 89, Spring 2014, L'Harmattan, pp. 81-93.

³ Fatiha DAZI-HÉNI. *Le Conseil de coopération du Golfe : Une coopération de sécurité et de défense renforcée?*, www.sciencespo.fr/cerif/sites/sciencespo.fr/cerif/files/art_fdh.pdf, September 2011.

⁴ Karen E. YOUNG. *The interventionist turn in Gulf States' Foreign policies*, www.agsiw.org, issue paper 4, June 2016.

⁵ Karen E. YOUNG. “The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC,” London, *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series/02*, December 2013.

⁶ Toby MATTHIESEN. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*, Stanford, SUP, 2013.

diplomatic agenda, never put up opposition, hence its silence on the Bahraini or Yemeni crises.

Saudi Arabia's most offence-oriented diplomacy, launched in March 2011 under the sovereign Abdullah, arises from disagreements on the Arab Spring revolts with the "leadership from behind" approach in the Middle East dear to President Obama. In 2015, it was under King Salman that the kingdom inaugurated a regional diplomacy emancipated from the American "guardian," the so-called Salman Doctrine,⁷ by contrast to the Obama Doctrine.⁸

The goal is double. On the one hand, Riyadh hopes to emerge as the central player, with the help of the GCC countries and hybrid regional actors such as Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and even Israel, the sole common denominator being the desire to counteract Iran's growing regional influence. On the other hand, aware of the irreversibility of Iran's comeback, Riyadh positions itself in the post-Obama period in order to push Washington to reengage in the Middle East.

By way of inauguration and to establish the new tempo of its interventionist diplomacy, Riyadh launched two regional initiatives, the first designed to expand the GCC to include the two other Arab monarchies, i.e. Jordan and Morocco (May 2011), and the second advocating turning the GCC into a Gulf Union (December 2013).

The first initiative, put forth under the collegiate seal of the GCC, was actually undertaken by common accord between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the GCC's two pivotal actors and the quickest to initiate a security dynamic in the region.

The appeal to include Morocco and Jordan, with whom the GCC countries (above all Riyadh and Abu Dhabi) maintain close ties, reflected the desire to unite the eight Sunni monarchies of the Arab world in order to address the revolutionary times and counteract Iran's growing regional influence.

Nonetheless, this initiative took the other monarchies in the pact by surprise. They found it premature but agreed to expanded cooperation in certain sectors (defence, security and trade at the GCC's

foreign affairs ministerial meetings), together with the allocation of financial aid up to the amount of US\$ 5 billion, staggered until 2017 (32nd GCC Summit of Heads of State, 19-20 December 2011). Thus, Bahrain and Oman expressed their hostility to the entry of Morocco and Jordan to the GCC labour market, which could aggravate a tense situation for national youth already dealing with endangered welfare states.⁹ Kuwait likewise expressed its reservations due to the liability of Jordan, which had expressed its solidarity with Saddam Hussein after the Kuwait invasion in August 1990. With regard to Qatar, its out-of-step position with regard to the Arab revolts led it to remain silent.

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Riyadh's other failure was the rejection generated by its ambition to turn the GCC into a political union. With the exception of Bahrain, under Saudi supervision since March 2011, this initiative was rejected by the other monarchies. Oman reacted with the greatest virulence, even threatening to leave the alliance on the eve of the 34th GCC Summit of Heads of State (10-11 December 2013) if the Gulf Union project was maintained, this being perceived as a Saudi temptation to hegemony.

In any case, Riyadh takes action above all to maintain the stability and the political status quo of which only the GCC can take advantage nowadays. Saudi Arabia has thus accommodated diverging approaches within the GCC insofar as they do not affect the monarchies' political status quo. Thus, Qatar's diplomatic isolation¹⁰ has consisted of pun-

⁷ It consists of developing means of isolating Iran and its "proxies" in order to restore the balance of power relations in the region. See Nawaf OBAID: "The Salman Doctrine: The Saudi Reply to Obama's Weakness," *The National Interest*, 30 March 2016.

⁸ It can be defined as a turn towards Asia, decreased military engagement, remote action (drone strikes, intelligence...) and dialogue with Iran. See Jeffrey GOLDBERG: "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

⁹ To ease social tension and prevent the worst unrest, the wealthiest four GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) decided to disburse financial aid to the amount of US\$ 10 billion over six years to Bahrain and Oman.

¹⁰ Qatar's pro-Muslim Brotherhood approach to Egypt caused a diplomatic crisis between Doha, Riyadh, Manama and Abu Dhabi, who recalled their ambassadors on 5 March 2014, but Riyadh endorsed reconciliation on the following 16 November.

ishing it for having crossed the red line, particularly by approaching the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, whose political project constitutes an alternative to the monarchies.

Iran, which is presented by Saudi Arabia as the origin of regional destabilization, serves more as a pretext for the GCC's security reinforcement

Riyadh's failures have incited it to step up the authoritarian dynamic of the GCC countries. This tendency seems to be the main lesson to be learned from the direction taken by Riyadh to deal with the changes occurring with the wave of Arab uprisings.¹¹

The signature of the GCC's reinforced security agreement in Riyadh on 14 November 2012 and its ratification in January 2014 by five of the member states, with the notable exception of Kuwait,¹² led to a strengthening of repressive measures in the ensemble of the countries involved. There was a consensus on the standardization of security policy among GCC leaders, but not among the societies (particularly the Kuwaiti and Bahraini ones, but also Saudi and Emirati human rights activists).

It is its role of guardian of a beleaguered citadel in a chaotic regional context and protector of the political status quo that lends Saudi Arabia its place as leader of the GCC rather than its supposed supremacy, often contested by its peers. On balance, Iran, which is presented by Saudi Arabia as the origin of regional destabilization, serves more as a pretext for the GCC's security reinforcement and the exacerbation of a hyper nationalism justifying the new regional interventionism of the Gulf States emancipated from American tutelage.

¹¹ Madawi AL-RASHEED. "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy: Loss without Gain?", *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States*. Collected Papers, 1. London, LSE Middle East Centre, April 2015.

¹² The Kuwaiti Parliament rejected ratification of this agreement on two separate occasions, considering certain amendments contrary to the country's Constitution. See Fatiha DAZI-HÉNI. "Printemps arabes et Résurgence sécuritaire des monarchies dynastiques de la péninsule Arabique," Hasni ABIDI (ed.): *Monde arabe : Entre transition et implosion*, Geneva, Erik Bonnier éditions, 2015, Chapter XII, pp. 246-270.