

## Changing Regional Order

# The Role of the Gulf Countries in the Mediterranean and the Middle East Following the Arab Spring

**Luciano Zaccara**

Research Assistant Professor  
Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University

In order to analyse the influence of the Gulf States' diplomatic initiatives in the Mediterranean and Middle East, it is necessary to look at both the six monarchies that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – and Iran. Especially since the Arab Spring and the conflicts it triggered, primarily in Syria and Yemen, the GCC States' foreign policy cannot be understood without analysing the role and diplomatic initiatives of Iran, as well. This is particularly true given that the Arab Spring has exacerbated existing tensions, mainly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, due to their different stances on Bahrain, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Both Saudi and Iranian policies have been reactive to the challenges generated by the Arab uprisings, not only domestically but in the region at large. Both states have tried to maximise their regional influence to the detriment of their adversary's interests in a zero-sum game that has only given rise to more violence and instability in the region.

The political developments resulting from the Arab Spring have also sparked diplomatic conflicts between the GCC States themselves. Since 2011, in light of the power vacuum left by the uprisings, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have pursued their own agendas, based on their own interests, with a view to maximising their gains from the new and turbulent regional situation. In some cases, such as in Libya, Yemen and Iraq, these agendas have included direct military intervention. These interests have revealed internal policy differences between the GCC members, as well as the different diplomatic styles of

their political elites, giving rise to the biggest diplomatic crisis in the organisation's history between Qatar and its Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini partners. The past several months, from November 2013 to the present, have been crucial in defining what some have called – in the view of this author, mistakenly – a new 'strategic alliance in the region,' due to the start of serious nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group that could lead to Iran's reinstatement as a constructive player in the region. The stagnation of the Syrian civil war, the worsening of the confrontations in Iraq, and the new military escalation in Yemen, all of which are viewed as stages on which the fight for regional predominance is playing out, run the risk of becoming sectarian wars that threaten the rest of the Mediterranean and the Arab world.

### **The Impact of the Arab Spring on the GCC's Foreign Policy**

While the 2011 Arab Spring, including the toppling of Ben Ali, Gaddafi and Mubarak, as well as the uprisings against King Hamad in Bahrain and against al-Assad in Syria, gave rise to a power vacuum and lack of political model, it was also an opportunity for the main regional players – Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey – to struggle to fill the void and become the benchmark for the incipient models, as well as the new hegemonic player. Despite their relatively small territorial and demographic weight, far less than that of the aforementioned regional players, Qatar and the UAE also joined the fight for regional leadership, conducting public diplomacy and offering financial (as well as military, in the Emirati case) aid, two essential tools to achieve their foreign policy goals in the first months of the crisis. The GCC countries were thus the first to provide legitimacy to the inter-

national intervention in Libya to halt the advance of Gaddafi's troops on Benghazi in March 2011.

As Qatar was the GCC State to suffer the fewest anti-government demonstrations, it was able to implement the most assertive and proactive foreign policy, without the need to overcome internal impediments. It thus became actively involved in the support for the model represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, in both Egypt, through Mohamed Morsi, and Tunisia, and, later, Syria, which was clearly a much more disruptive approach to the pre-Arab Spring status quo. In contrast, due to the growing number of protests in the eastern side of the country, Saudi Arabia was forced to pursue a much more cautious policy, aimed at preserving the status quo, primarily in the Arabian Peninsula, by supporting the Bahraini and Omani regimes, which, to different degrees, faced strong civic protests at home.

Although the overall objectives of the Saudi and Qatari strategies differed, they agreed on one key point: the overthrow of al-Assad's regime in Syria. And while both countries supported King Hamad in Bahrain, only Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent security forces to the kingdom to support the government.

Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood led to a direct confrontation not only with Saudi Arabia, but also with the UAE, a confrontation that ultimately culminated in a diplomatic crisis in 2014 involving all three states plus Bahrain. At the same time, the Qatari experiment of backing Morsi proved to be its greatest failure in terms of its foreign objectives. Following Morsi's fall, the Egyptian Central Bank returned 2 billion dollars to the country in September 2013. In exchange, it received financial aid from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, who together pledged close to 15 billion dollars, underscoring the shift in loyalty and regional support away from Qatar. Simply put, Qatar's aspirations were beyond its real possibilities to support and control its regional allies in the struggle for regional leadership. Ultimately, its position, more disruptive than supportive of the status quo, set it at odds with many of its regional partners, without yielding any benefits. Finally, the lack of coordination between the GCC members with regard to support for the opposition forces in Syria not only weakened their capability to overthrow the Assad regime, but also had repercussions for the relations with Saudi Arabia and delegitimised the rebels, who witnessed how al-Assad remained in power

after four years of uprisings, having negotiated with the United States with regard to its chemical weapons and without losing its support in the region from players such as Hezbollah and Iran.

Some have cited this relative Qatari failure as the main reason why Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani decided to hand over power to his son, Tamim, in June 2013, with a view to easing tensions with his partners and lowering Qatar's foreign profile in order to continue concentrating on strategies more closely linked to the use of soft power, such as the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup and other cultural, sport and humanitarian initiatives. Growing domestic opposition, above all among young people, to the Qatari intervention in Syria and other scenarios was also a decisive factor in the country's efforts to restore its image abroad.

Two other countries in the region underwent changes at the governmental level. First, Hassan Rouhani won the presidential elections in Iran in June 2013, triggering a dramatic shift in the country's foreign policy with a variety of regional repercussions. Second, King Salman bin Abdulaziz replaced the deceased King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia in January 2015. Although in this case, major changes were not observed in the country's foreign policy, subsequent events in Yemen and the direct intervention sponsored by Salman seem to suggest he will pursue a more interventionist foreign policy than his predecessor.

In addition to the intervention in Yemen, which began in March 2015 and involved the military participation of all the GCC States except Oman, in August 2014, the UAE, together with President el-Sisi's Egypt, engaged in a unilateral military intervention to stop the advance of the jihadist militias in eastern Libya. Once again, the specific agendas and interests of individual GCC States gave rise to diverse foreign policy initiatives and direct interventions that were not coordinated between the six countries and which sometimes involved backing different domestic players, as was the cases in Syria and Egypt.

### **The GCC's Internal Dispute**

The story of the confrontation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia is not new, but rather dates back to 1995, when Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani came

to power in Qatar after overthrowing his father. One year later, Saudi Arabia and the emirate Abu Dhabi allegedly supported a palace coup that sought to place Emir Hamad bin Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Emir's cousin, on the throne. The attempt culminated in the sentencing to death of 19 people, including a Saudi citizen, and the deportation of nearly 6,000 members of the Al Murrah tribe, with dual Saudi-Qatari citizenship, accused of supporting the coup. Ever since, Qatar has played the role of the maverick within the context of GCC discipline, trying to offset the omnipresent Saudi pressure on the foreign policy of all the other member states. The stance on Iran, with which Qatar has not had particularly fraught relations and with which it shares economic interests in the area of natural gas production, has been one of the main points of friction with Saudi Arabia. Then President Mahmud Ahmadinejad was even invited for the first time to a GCC summit, to be held in Doha in December 2007, something that would not have been well-received by the Saudis.

There has likewise been constant pressure on the Qatari television network Al-Jazeera whenever its broadcasts have been critical of the monarchical regimes of Saudi Arabia and other regional partners. However, in 2008, the two royal families held bilateral talks to improve the relations between the two states, with the current Emir Tamim bin Hamad playing an important role. Both states, but especially Qatar, had been crucial in the partial rehabilitation of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, who had taken a strong hit in the regional Arab context following the forced Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. However, as noted, the Arab Spring created a power vacuum that both Saudi Arabia and Qatar tried to fill, in the Qatari case through strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that was beginning to be seen as a threat to the stability of the Saudi and Emirati regimes.

In this context, on 5 March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain issued a joint statement in which they called for the State of Qatar, and its Emir, Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, to implement and honour the security agreements signed by the GCC States and 'to comply with the principles that ensure

non-interference in the internal affairs of any of the GCC countries, either directly or indirectly, and not to support any party that threatens the security and stability of the GCC countries whether organisations or individuals, either through direct security work or by political influence, and not to support the hostile media.<sup>1</sup> The security agreement to which the statement referred is one of the cooperation framework agreements on the exchange of information and tracking down of criminals and those suspected of breaking the law proposed at the Council's inception in 1981. As no consensus was reached regarding its content, its signing was postponed and it resurfaced in 1994 and was brought to the table again, following the events of the Arab Spring, through the efforts of its main backer, Saudi Arabia.

However, despite the controversy fanned by the Gulf media, the main opponent of the agreement was not Qatar but the emirate of Kuwait. Specifically, the Kuwaiti Parliament, the most active and rebellious in the GCC, opposed nine articles, some because it considered them to undermine the sovereignty of the Council's member states with regard to the persecution, arrest and trial of their own citizens, and others because they contravene the Kuwaiti constitution.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the agreement was signed by the six members in Riyadh in November 2012 and was subsequently ratified by all members except Kuwait at the Manama summit in December that same year. As for the other five members, Qatar was the first to ratify it, through Emir Tamim, on 28 August 2013. This was followed by ratification by the Saudi cabinet on 16 September, by the President of the Emirati federation, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, on 21 October, by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain, on 27 November, and by Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman, on 14 January 2014.<sup>3</sup> The statement went on to say that, despite signing and ratifying the agreement, Qatar had failed to take 'the necessary measures to put it into force,' even after being repeatedly enjoined by all three of the statement's joint issuers to do so. Alleging that this failure to implement the agreement seriously affected the security of the other member states, the statement

<sup>1</sup> See <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/uae-saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-issue-joint-statement-on-qatar-1.1299738>.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.mashrou3watan.com/?p=842](http://www.mashrou3watan.com/?p=842).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/gcc-security-pact-divides-kuwait-1.1297430>.

ended by saying that, in light of the lack of collaboration from the 'brotherly State of Qatar,' the issuers had no choice but to withdraw their ambassadors from Doha, to be effective on 5 March 2014.

The explicit mention of the lack of collaboration referred to three key issues emerging from the November 2012 summits: that all GCC member states should distance themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood and its intrusive policies throughout the Arab world; that the controversial media activity of the Egyptian cleric residing in Doha, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, should be restricted; and that the movements of Iranian 'agents' within the GCC should be restricted. In this context, it was clear that the political and financial support that Qatar had promised to Egyptian President Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, laid at the heart of the dispute.

The UAE had also lodged specific protests against Yusuf al-Qaradawi and his support for the Brotherhood, as well as against the Qatari television network Al-Jazeera. Part of this conflict between Qatar and the UAE was on display in the arrest at the Dubai airport in February 2013 of Mahmoud al-Jaidah, a Qatari physician accused of taking financial aid to the Al Islah organisation, the Brotherhood's Emirati branch. The arrest, which was made without formal charges, led to the solitary confinement of the detainee and even torture, and was followed by Amnesty International, which called for clarification of the detainee's whereabouts and status, as well as a fair trial.<sup>4</sup>

In March 2014, at the peak of the GCC's internal tensions, following the withdrawal of the ambassadors from Doha, Saudi Arabia listed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, underscoring its priorities of security and internal stability and its position on the conflicts in Egypt and Syria. The Saudis also pressured their regional partners, who reacted in different ways. Oman and Kuwait were both reluctant to bow to the Saudi demands. The Brotherhood is allowed to participate in Kuwaiti politics as a political force, and even to have MPs; outlawing it would thus only further chip away at the already fragile legitimacy of the al-Sabah family. For its part, Oman has resisted introducing measures that

might affect an opposition group that has not caused any major problems in the country, just as it has also rejected all other measures proposed by Saudi Arabia with a view to further integrating the GCC States to form a Gulf Union, at the expense of each state's individual sovereignty. The government in Bahrain, in turn, depends on the backing of al-Minbar, the Brotherhood's branch in the country, to remain in power, due to the lack of support from the majority of the parties representing Shiites and liberals. However, in this case, al-Khalifa gave precedence to the ties with Saudi Arabia, which would be the ultimate champion of his dynasty's stability, rather than the domestic political legitimacy granted by his own citizens, a clear indication of the priorities of the governing houses of the Gulf.<sup>5</sup>

### **Reconciliation and a Common Front against Iran**

The diplomatic escalation within the GCC continued for several months, until the Doha summit held on 8 December 2014. There, with the mediation of Emir al-Sabah of Kuwait, the Heads of State of the four opposed states 'rubbed noses' as a gesture of reconciliation. Although the summit generated considerable expectation and led to a host of preparations (the city was decorated, heavy security was positioned along the main roads, and the Sheraton hotel, where the meeting would be held, was hastily renovated), it barely lasted four hours. Other than the staging of the reconciliation, the only noteworthy thing to take place was the signing of an agreement to create a new joint naval force in order to strengthen the GCC's defence mechanisms in the face of an Iranian threat. To this end, Saudi Arabia placed considerable pressure on its monarchical allies, warning that it was necessary to set their internal differences aside in order to concentrate on the biggest regional threat of all, which was not ISIS-ISIL-DAESH but rather the growing Iranian influence in the region, as represented in early 2015 by the occupation of Sana by Houthi rebel groups, presumably with the logistical, ideological and perhaps even financial and military support of Iran.

<sup>4</sup> According to *Doha News*, al-Jaidah was pardoned by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan on 24 May 2015, with a view to improving the relations between the two states. See <http://dohanews.co/uae-pardons-qatari-doctor-jailed-for-supporting-banned-islamist-group/>

<sup>5</sup> ZACCARA, L. and SALDAÑA, M. "Cambio y estabilidad política en las monarquías del Golfo tras la Primavera Árabe," *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, No. 109, p. 194-195.

The most recent chapter of the regional clashes, Yemen, has elicited the most direct and coordinated response of all those given by the GCC States since the Arab Spring, except for the participation of forces from all six states in the international coalition led by the United States to combat the ISIS-ISIL-DAESH forces in Iraqi territory. While the threat from this radical group has obliged all six states and Jordan to reinforce their internal security measures and tighten their borders, the prospect of an out-of-control Yemen in Saudi Arabia's backyard, and the corresponding pressure that Iran would be able to exert on its regional adversary, was sufficiently compelling to lead to a direct military intervention without the legitimisation of the United Nations Security Council. The announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, on 2 April 2015, which establishes the framework of the agreement between Iran and the P5+1 group (the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom and Germany) with regard to the nuclear negotiations, served only as another cause for concern for the GCC States.<sup>6</sup> Under the agreement, Iran seriously undertook, for the first time since the start of the negotiations in 2002, to offer all the necessary guarantees required by the UN and the IAEA, as well as to reduce its stock of enriched uranium and to transform its nuclear facilities and limit its enrichment capacity, while the international community undertook to lift sanctions following verification of Iran's compliance with the conditions. The United States recognised Iran's right to develop a nuclear programme under international supervision, beginning with the long process of normalising Iran's standing within the regional and international community. For the first time, a conflict in the region was beginning to be settled by diplomatic means and without the use of force, requiring all the parties to give ground in a negotiated process whereby both sides would receive guarantees in return for concessions. However, the GCC States took a diametrically opposed view of the matter. Although officially they supported the agreement, unofficially they rejected any possibility that Iran might become a nuclear power, arguing that it would be much easier for Iran to then transform its nuclear technology for military purposes. Additionally, the new stage in the relations

between the United States and Iran left the GCC in a delicate position, watching as its foreign policy was delegitimised by the aggressive stance on Syria and the lack of significant cooperation on its fight against ISIS in Iraq. In this context, marked by the occupation of Sana by the Houthi forces and the support (more moral than real) of Tehran, it was perceived by many as the only alternative for Saudi Arabia other than to continue giving ground to Iran, particularly in light of the passivity of President Obama, who has been blamed in the region for his inaction against al-Assad and his naivety in the negotiations with Iran.

## Conclusion

The Arab Spring both exacerbated the already tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and highlighted the delicate balance between the six members of the GCC. The lack of common goals and strategies to address the power vacuum left by the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and the disastrous strategy with regard to Assad's regime led to the largest political crisis in the GCC's history, setting Qatar, and to a lesser extent Oman, against the rest of its members throughout 2014. The reconciliation was only possible once the states became convinced that Iran represented a much greater strategic challenge than ISIS. However, Iran has played the leading role in the only diplomatic occurrence in the region that would signify a final, long-term solution to a conflict that dates back many years, with the ensuing stability that would bring. Paradoxically, this has led to a renewed escalation of the violence in Yemen, due to the conflicting interpretations of what the control of a large swath of the country by the Houthis, presumably backed by Iran, means.

Far from stabilising, the region seems more troubled today than ever, with an escalation in the violence that encompasses Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. In many cases, the conflicts have taken on sectarian undertones. The reactive policies of the main state players involved have only deepened these sectarian differences, making any sort of political solution even harder to attain.

<sup>6</sup> The final agreement is slated to be signed on 30 June 2015.