

Transitional Processes and Political Change in Arab Countries

Gulf Countries and Arab Transitions: Role, Support and Effects

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The recent decades have witnessed a great transformation of what were once peripheral and largely inconsequential Gulf states. The members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC); Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have witnessed an influx of enormous wealth generated by rising hydrocarbon prices, which elevated these countries into pre-eminence in regional politics. As GCC states started to accumulate more soft and smart power through their economic, financial, media and international status, they began to act more visibly within the wider Middle East and the Mediterranean region (MENA) and beyond. This was more evident in the role of Gulf States in mediation, economic and financial aid and their growing investments and growing political influence in the region. Indeed, the GCC states started to take centre stage in Arab regional economics and politics. The Arab Spring, which started in 2011, initiated one of the greatest transformations within the Arab world and further enhanced the roles of the GCC states. However, the GCC states do not follow a coherent strategy and nor do they have a unified foreign policy, but rather different sets of conflicting foreign policies, which has often led to misunderstandings and disagreements within the group. The Arab Spring has further accentuated these differences among the GCC states and widened their policy divergence, leading to further ruptures and conflicts between them. These inharmonious and conflictual policies have had a nega-

tive effect on the whole region, especially on the Arab countries in transition.

The Gulf States and the Arab Spring:

Starting in Tunisia in 2011 and then spreading across the Arab world, the wave of popular political protests and revolutions known as the Arab Spring dramatically transformed the political landscape of Arab countries and even threatened some of the GCC states themselves. This historic wave of uprisings not only took everyone by surprise, but sent a shockwave through the prevailing regional order and presented a serious challenge to the status quo that prevailed during the dormant Arab Regional System. The widespread call for democracy in the region has not spared the GCC states. These countries have witnessed currents and ripple effects of the wave, and in different variations, ranging from demands for reforms, to public protests and even violent confrontations with the regimes. The wave of the Arab Spring promised to rid the region of the autocratic and authoritarian regimes that have ruled over their people for decades and establish long-awaited democracy in the Arab world. As the Arab Spring wave gathered momentum, autocratic Arab leaders started to fall one after another in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. These seismic changes in the Arab world created new geopolitical dynamics, regional instability and great uncertainty, in turn posing an enormous security challenge for the Gulf States. Naturally, as GCC state leaders had different views of the Arab Spring, they reacted differently. Internally, the GCC states tried to stem the tide of the wave through a number of policies, including financial handouts, increased job opportunities, repression and military intervention, as happened in Bahrain.

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The GCC states also offered the two most affected members, Bahrain and Oman, financial aid of \$10 billion for each state over 10 years. This apparent consensus on confronting the Arab Spring on the home front was not matched by similar GCC state agreements on how to deal with the Arab uprising in other Arab countries. On the contrary, it became evident that GCC states had different views on the Arab Spring and followed different policies in dealing with it, thereby reflecting their divergent foreign policies, their dissimilar threat perceptions and leadership orientation. In essence, Qatar is an exception as it is the main country that wholeheartedly supported the Arab Spring and the Arab transition. Qatar followed its policy of supporting the popular uprising by extending assistance to the newly elected governments that replaced the dictatorships; while Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain largely opposed the elected Islamic governments and saw them as a potential threat to their security. Kuwait and Oman remained largely quiet but still cautious of the emerging changes and apprehensive of the subsequent instability.

GCC States' Foreign Policy Differences Accentuated by the Arab Spring

Despite several decades of regional integration, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political and economic group made up of the Arab states, still exhibit a lack of unification or coherence in their foreign policy making. Historical conflicts, boarder disputes, dynastic antagonism and competition were among the main reasons for GCC states' divergent policies.

This results in them pursuing individual and differentiated foreign policies that converge or diverge, according to each state's national interests and its

leadership's perceptions. In certain cases they are able to bury their foreign policy differences and act collectively, but mostly they do not, and conflicts re-surface. This is no truer than in the case of the GCC's foreign policies towards the Arab Spring and subsequent Arab transitions.

The Arab Spring did not only rid the Arab world of some of its autocratic leaders, who were favoured by some GCC states, but also brought about elected governments of Islamic political orientation and harboured geo-political and structural changes that threatened the prevailing order. Qatar has acted as a staunch supporter of the Arab uprisings and the Arab countries in transition while the other Gulf states have fretted about their own stability at a time of regional upheavals. Unsurprisingly, Qatar's policy antagonised fellow GCC states, which viewed the Arab Spring and political Islam as a threat. The Al-Sisi Military coup, which overthrew the elected Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi, was an attempt to stem the tide of the Arab Spring and diminish the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood that had gained power in the transition. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain threw their weight behind the Military coup in Egypt, while Qatar continued to support Morsi's 'legitimate' ousted Muslim Brotherhood government, which led to deeper disagreements between the GCC states. Having failed to change the Qatari position, three GCC states; Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain decided to withdraw their respective ambassadors from Doha in an effort to increase pressure on Qatar to change its stance. The March 2014 decision to withdraw ambassadors is but one of many examples of the deep-rooted conflicts and differences within the GCC states. This schism and conflictual environment within the GCC states has had a negative impact on their foreign policy and has led to what some would call a Gulf states 'Cold war,' where their differences and disagreements are being played out in the Arab countries in transition.

Gulf Countries and Arab Transitions: Role, Support and Effects

The Gulf states played different roles in the Arab transition reflecting their divergent foreign policies and their different leadership perceptions. In the

case of Tunisia and Egypt, with the exception of Qatar, they were on friendly terms with the authoritarian regimes of Mubarak and Ben Ali. Indeed, some Arab leaders, like the ousted Mubarak of Egypt and Ben Ali of Tunisia, were cultivated by the Gulf states and became clients of their new patron – the Gulf rulers. Naturally, the GCC states were against the uprising in both countries, which led to the downfall of their staunch allies. Their negative attitude towards the popular uprisings continued to reflect in their lack of cooperation with the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood governments in both countries. Indeed, despite decades of somewhat convenient relations with the Gulf states, the Brotherhood is loathed by some Gulf leaders and is considered an enemy and a terrorist organisation in most of the Gulf states. One could also argue that if elections had brought about liberal/secular governments in both countries, the attitude of the Gulf states would not have been dramatically different. The Gulf states prefer the status quo and scorn any sign of real democracy in the Arab world. For the Gulf states, not only are democratic governments more difficult to influence than authoritarian rulers, but the spread of democracy may provide a model for their populations to aspire to. The rise of political Islam in and around the region provided another reason for Gulf states' anxiety. Their support for the newly elected governments was, therefore, limited or non-existent.

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In part, the Gulf states were obliged to support the post-Arab Spring transitional economies. Their governments have a strong incentive to provide aid to prevent Arab transitional countries from collapsing, from a moral and geopolitical standpoint: if the Arab

Spring countries are not stabilised and their economies cannot generate enough growth and employment, political instability there could worsen and spread throughout the entire region. Additionally, the Gulf states had to be seen to be supporting their partner Arab countries, especially when international donors became involved. For instance, at the Deauville May 2011 summit in France, leaders of the Group of Eight (G8) pledged some \$40 billion of aid, mostly cheap loans, to Egypt and Tunisia over an unspecified time period, which was later doubled. As part of the G8 partnership's initiative, most of the GCC states (namely Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) pledged \$13 billion dollars to both Arab partner countries, much of which did not materialise. The problem was certainly not a lack of funds; sustained high oil prices over the past few years have increased GCC states' wealth and financial surpluses. Political instability in some countries gave reason for both Arab and international donors to re-evaluate their pledges. However, for the Gulf states, there was another dimension that added to their lack of enthusiasm to support the countries in transition. GCC states used aid as a statecraft; by providing aid slowly and in relatively small amounts, they retain political leverage over the recipient countries. Moreover, political considerations made countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates more cautious about extending aid. Conservative GCC governments viewed the success of the uprisings and Islamic political parties winning elections in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco as an ideological and security threat. Indeed, the GCC states found themselves surrounded by a political Islam that could challenge their legitimacy and undermine their traditional monarchical system. Not only did they withdraw pledges of financial support to the post-Arab Spring transitional countries but, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the GCC states soon mounted a counter revolution supporting counter-revolutionary and military forces to take power from elected governments. They used their soft and smart powers to undermine elected governments and to prop up and support military and other opponents of political Islam. Qatar, on the other hand, was doing the opposite. It not only supported the uprising, but also offered economic, political and media support to post-Arab Spring transitional countries and their elected governments.

Thus, in **Egypt**, which is central to Arab geopolitics – Cairo being the home of the Arab League which embodies the Arab regional System, and the country being the backbone of Gulf security and its cultural identity – the different GCC camps competed against each other to ensure that the country's government was one that aligned more closely with their respective orientations.

As the elected Morsi government failed to meet the aspirations of Egypt's revolutionary youth, due to the nature of the 'deep State,' where the well-entrenched remnants of the previous regime continued to manage state apparatus and played an obstructing role, coupled with the Morsi government's lack of experience, it was overthrown by a military coup in July 2013, and the country returned to military rule.

The Morsi government did not last more than a year and its dramatic downfall was enthusiastically welcomed by the Gulf states, which extended political and economic support to the Al-Sisi government. Beside political statements and diplomatic support to the military-led government, the GCC countries were quick to pledge financial and economic backing to Egypt's ailing economy. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait offered Egypt \$15 billion after the coup. There were also more pledges to support Egypt announced by the three GCC states and a large influx of politically-inspired public and private funds were channelled to Egypt, including a \$40-billion housing project for the Egyptian army to build one million housing units for low-income youth from a UAE-based company, Arabtec. The GCC states also proposed a 'Friends of Egypt' conference to ensure the regime's financial stability.

Meanwhile, Qatar continued to support the toppled, 'legitimate' Muslim Brotherhood Morsi government. Qatar had provided financial aid to Egypt in 2011-2013 estimated to total \$8 billion. The Qatari government remained faithful to the Morsi government and continued its media and diplomatic offensive against the military rule, despite Al-Sisi's landslide victory in the presidential elections of June 2014. Egypt's new rulers felt threatened by the Qatari stand and initiated their own propaganda against Qatar. Qatar, which a year ago during Morsi's rule had been the supporter, has become the enemy. Egypt's central bank went to the extent of returning a US\$2 billion loan agreed previously with Qatar.

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The conflicting positions of the GCC states regarding Egypt reflected not only on their role in that country but also on their own bilateral relations. Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain turned from cold to warm after the military coup, while relations with Qatar went the opposite direction and started to deteriorate. The withdrawal of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain's ambassadors from Doha is largely a result of their opposing positions with regard to Egypt. Qatar was considered, by its Gulf partners, as a spoiler of the well-orchestrated military coup against the Brotherhood and, therefore, must be banished. The withdrawal of ambassadors was considered as the first of a number of measures to force Qatar to abandon its strategy of supporting the Arab Spring and particularly its support for the Brotherhood. However, Qatar's position has not changed, despite its ruler Sheikh Hamad, the architect of Qatar's Arab Spring-era foreign policy, stepping aside last year. When his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, assumed power, many speculated that the new, young Emir would tame his country's foreign policy ambitions. However, that did not materialise and he continued with the same policy.

The anti-revolutionary and anti-Arab Spring camp of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain and even Kuwait, along with Egypt, went to the extent of branding the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation and making it illegal. Many Brotherhood leaders and followers in Egypt and the Gulf have been arrested and imprisoned. Mr Morsi's removal by the Egyptian military was a major setback to any real democracy taking place in the region, and in countries where Doha was once seen as a liberator, it is now sidelined and is being perceived as a supporter only of Islamists, rather than the national interest.

In **Tunisia**, while Qatar supported the uprising and the newly elected Ennahda government, which is a brand of the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, offered a refuge for Zine El Abidine

Ben Ali, the ousted President. When the Islamist Ennahda Party was elected to government, Doha invested hundreds of millions of dollars. Last year, Qatar National Bank gave Tunis US\$500 million to bolster its foreign currency reserves as the government came under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to enact reforms. Qatar also spent US\$31 million on housing projects in Tunisia, and invested in infrastructure and telecom projects. Saudi Arabia and UAE, on the other hand, stand accused of working against Ennahda and supporting other groups bent on toppling it and destabilising the country.

In **Libya**, the policy of GCC states, which initially supported the uprising by providing political, economic, media and even military means against the ousted and brutally murdered Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi, soon started to diverge, as Islamic forces began to emerge and take over power in the country. Saudi Arabia and UAE were accused of supporting the attempted military coup led by the retired Libyan Brigadier General Khalifah Haftar. Both countries were said to support Haftar's armed forces against the elected, Qatari-backed central government. Media in Saudi Arabia and the UAE have expressed tacit support for the onslaught launched by armed forces loyal to General Haftar amid the escalation of events in the city of Benghazi.

In **Yemen**, there was some consensus on the part of the Gulf states given its close proximity and its contiguous borders with two GCC member states; Oman and Saudi Arabia. In fact, given Saudi Arabia's ultra-sensitivity to the plight of its southern neighbour, the Gulf states deferred it a leading role in the situation. Here the GCC Secretariat General, supported largely by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, played a major role in finding a peaceful solution to the popular uprising, demanding the downfall of the Saleh government. The GCC brokered a deal to transfer power from President Ali Abdullah to the Yemeni vice-President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi. The agreement, signed in Saudi Arabia, was expected to clear a key hurdle in the transition to a new era for Yemen, which had been the scene of violent protests for months as Saleh's opponents demanded that he leave power after 33 years in office. Ali Abdullah Saleh, thus, became the fourth Arab leader forced from power by the popular uprising. GCC states took part in the Friends of Ye-

men Conference aimed at providing financial support to stabilise the country and pledged the highest percentage of aid, although very little was actually disbursed. Less is known about Qatar's alleged support of the opposition factions, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, but Doha reportedly donated US\$80 million to the Yemeni branch of the Brotherhood during the unrest that led to the end of President Saleh's decades-long rule. Qatar also funded the establishment of a Yemeni television station, the Yemen Youth Channel, but its investment has since ebbed. Along with Iran, Qatar is also alleged to be supporting the Houthi rebellions against the Saudi-backed Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi government, which have recently made many military advances against the central government, threatening the country's capital Sanaa.

Even in **Syria**, where geostrategic considerations and Damascus' close relations with Iran and Hezbollah and its role in Lebanon galvanised GCC support for the opposition against the brutal rule of the Assad regime and its harsh treatment of the uprising, GCC states' interests were not aligned. GCC states supported competing rebel groups, thus reducing the opposition's effectiveness. Qatar is said to have significantly reduced its involvement in Syria as Saudi Arabia and UAE began to pour money into different rebel groups not favoured by Qatar.

Conclusion

These conflicting GCC state positions did more harm than good to Arab countries in transition and polarised their societies into at least two camps: one backed by Qatar supporting the revolutions and political Islam, and the other a counter-revolutionary camp led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, aimed at returning the transition countries to their

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pre-Arab Spring status quo. The competitive and uncooperative environment between the GCC states has resulted in conflicting policies aimed mainly at thwarting and frustrating each other's plans, rather than genuinely supporting Arab countries in transition. It is, therefore, becoming more evident that the GCC states are playing out their differences in the Arab transition countries, which are more in need of sincere political, economic and social support and reform than being used as the playground for a GCC cold war. Moreover, such an opaque and unstable environment creates the ideal conditions for further external (international and regional) forces to interfere in Arab politics, particularly in the Arab countries in transition, which have also become fertile grounds for fundamentalist groups and radical forces who have found gaps in which to operate and gain strength and support, thereby increasing instability and posing greater security challenges in the future.

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