

# global POLICY

GCC: EVALUATION,  
LESSONS LEARNED  
AND FUTURE  
PROSPECTS

2019 IMEIS Annual  
Conference  
Proceedings

Edited by Juline Beaujoun



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**IMEIS Annual Conference 2019**

**GCC: Evaluation, Lessons Learned and Future Prospects**

*Edited by Juline Beaujouan*

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**IMEIS Annual Conference 2019**

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## Contents

### Abstracts

Introduction – Prof. Anoush Ehteshami, Director of the Institute of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies

1 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its Future Prospects – Dr. Abdullah Baabood

2 The Evaluation of the GCC from the Perspective of Small State Studies – Dr. Máté Szalai

3 The Gulf Crisis: The Economic Perspective and the Role of the Gulf Regional Hubs – Moustafa Ali

4 Oman: Institutional Genealogy of an Exceptional Foreign Policy – Noha Ezzat

5 Saving the GCC: Kuwait’s Mediation Role in Qatar Crisis – Dr. Tahani Al-Terkait

6 The Impact of Security Threat on the Unity of GCC – Dr. Shady A. Mansour

7 Iran, Turkey and the Qatar Crisis with the GCC. Emerging Middle Powers in the Middle East and their Struggle for Hegemony – Dr. Alberto Gasparetto

8 United We Stand? Measuring Threat Perception of Iran within the Riyadh-Aby Dhabi Axis – Cinzia Bianco

9 Roundtable Report – The Future of the GCC in a Troubled Region

About the Authors

Acknowledgements

About the Institute for Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

About Global Policy

## **Abstracts**

### **The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its Future Prospects – Dr. Abdullah Baabood**

The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf hereinafter referred to as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been developing as a regional organization with the aim of fostering existing ties between its member states to help bring them closer to each other through cooperation and integration leading to 'unity'. Born out of the need for security, the GCC has made some limited success in affecting some regional cooperation but has failed to enhance deeper integration. The specific nature of the GCC, its outdated Charter and institutional makeup as well as the obstinate state sovereignty have coalesced to slow down its progress and prevent its future development. Recurrent inter-state disputes and especially the current Gulf crisis between its member states has almost rendered the organization ineffective. Despite some efforts at resolving the crisis, the blockade initiated against a member state still persists negatively affecting the organizational coherence and its future. The crisis demonstrates the ineptness of the GCC and intensified its fractures. Although regional organizations do not always vanish overnight, the GCC could endure for some time before it fissile away. The GCC now stands at a juncture point either to persist and outlast its current crisis and revive its mission and objectives or to slowly fade away. The indications show that even if it managed to survive and overcome its predicament, it is very unlikely that it will return to its normal status without a major revision to its charter, exclusive membership and the competency of its institutions.

### **The Evaluation of the GCC from the Perspective of Small State Studies – Dr. Máté Szalai**

All mainstream schools of International Relations agree that forming alliances and joining international organizations constitutes one of the most crucial decisions a small state has to make in order to ensure its survival, well-being and to pursue its interest. Representatives of the realist tradition argue that the security deficit caused by limited resources can best be managed by clever bandwagoning, while neoliberal thinkers rather focus on the costs and benefits of integration. Constructivism, on the other hand, researches supranational identity formation and normative protection attached to such institutional cooperation.

In spite of the rich tradition of analyzing small state alliance making and of the internal dynamics of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), interpreting the latter from a small state studies perspective is mostly lacking in the literature. Nevertheless, depending on the definition, at least four out of the six member states (namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman) meet the requirements of small state classification. On the other hand, the mixture of cooperation and conflict, of inequalities and interdependences, of trust and mistrust is tangible in the intra-GCC relations, which formulate a fertile ground for such an endeavour.

The aim of the research is to interpret and analyze the dynamics of the GCC integration process and structure from the perspective of small state studies. The main research question is whether the Gulf Cooperation Council meets the theoretical expectations set by small state studies. Methodologically, the research will start with the investigation of different angles towards integrations of small state studies, which will be applied to the GCC as a whole. In the third and last part, the current Gulf rift and the strategy of Qatar will be analyzed as a case study in the framework of small state theory.

### **The Gulf Crisis: The Economic Perspective and the Role of the Gulf Regional Hubs – Moustafa Ali**

The aim of this paper is to explore the economic perspective behind the Gulf Crisis, the geostrategic significance of Gulf regional hubs: the economic prospects, how economic alliances and counter economic alliances are being shaped, the threats such regional hubs poses to UAE's economy, particularly Dubai's twin sophisticated and highly advanced global hub ports, Jibel Ali, and Rashid ports. The study uses a generic qualitative research methodology and document analysis. This paper, therefore, comes in four sections and a conclusion. The first section focuses on the economic perspective of the current Gulf Crisis. The second section is on Gwadar's geostrategic significance. The third section discusses how a regional hub port such as Gwadar is shaping 'economic alliances' and 'counter economic alliance' in the region as well as examines how the GCC countries may respond to the rising of regional hubs. The third section discusses to what extent the development of gulf regional hub ports, such as Gwadar's port, represents a threat to Dubai's economy. The paper, then, concludes with findings and recommendations.

### **Oman: Institutional Genealogy of an Exceptional Foreign Policy – Noha Ezzat**

Oman has long pursued an independent foreign policy compared to other states in the GCC. It has exhibited friendly ties to Iran unlike many of its neighbors, alongside a long partnership with India in contrast to the strategic relations that bind Pakistan and most GCC members. Analyses of Oman's unique policy often refer to its people's distinct brand of Islam (*Ibadhi* Islam), which sets it apart from the predominantly Sunni Islam of other GCC states. Following a constructivist argument, these factors are assumed to be key in shaping a different threat perception amongst Omani policymakers and distancing them from the Sunni orientation that characterizes the GCC's support for Pakistan and its rivalry with Iran. This paper will aim to scrutinize this constructivist explanation by providing an alternative understanding based on historical institutionalism. The paper shall argue that Oman's policy in the Gulf and South Asia started to take its current shape since it came under British influence in the late nineteenth century and developed its modern institutional capacities under British power and its pivot in India. This has imbued Oman's policy with a lasting intertwinement with India, in addition to an Anglophile legacy that continues to distance it from other GCC states whose institutional capacities were shaped at a later stage under

predominantly American influence, thus inheriting a higher affiliation with the US's friendships (e.g. Pakistan) and rivalries (e.g. Cold War India and post-1979 Iran).

### **Saving the GCC: Kuwait's Mediation Role in the Gulf Crisis – Dr. Tahani Al-Terkait**

'Saving the GCC: Kuwait's Mediation Role in the Gulf Crisis' sheds light on the role of Kuwait in seeking to end the ongoing Gulf Crisis between the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt) and Qatar.

For Kuwait, restoring the unity of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and regional stability is a goal, not an end. Its diplomatic endeavors actually represent a departure from its traditional circumspect neutrality. Its approach is based on mediation, philanthropy, wise leadership, a profound belief in the GCC as a regional incubator for the Arab Peninsula, and the shift in power caused by the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The paper concludes with some important statements by Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait, who is determined to end the crisis, secure the GCC's stability, and the welfare of the many peoples of the region.

### **The Impact of Security Threat Perception on the Unity of GCC – Dr. Shady A. Mansour**

GCC is facing unprecedented challenges, due to the rising security threats and regional rivalry among major Middle Eastern powers. The Iranian rising influence represented a grave threat to some GCC members, notably Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE, especially after its intervention in Bahrain to support Shiite terrorist organizations, as well as supporting Houthi militias in Yemen. However, other members like Qatar and Oman did not perceive Iran as a threat, which further increased the tensions within the GCC. On the other hand, Turkey and Qatar adopted policies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring that are perceived as threatening to both Saudi Arabia and UAE, especially their support to political Islam groupings, most notably Muslim Brotherhood. Ankara's subsequent utilization of Jamal Khashoggi's assassination to create international pressure over Riyadh further elevated the perception of Turkey as a threat. The US, on the other hand, is trying to resolve the Qatari crisis in order to restore the unity of GCC and establish Middle East Security Alliance (MESA), widely known as "Arab Nato", which will be responsible for countering the Iranian Influence. The American efforts is facing immense challenges as evident in the postponement of the GCC – US summit several times. Against this background, the paper argues that security challenge is the main responsible for the current rift inside GCC, and will try to assess the effectiveness of the American efforts to restore the unity of the regional block.

## **Iran, Turkey and the Qatar Crisis with the GCC. Emerging Middle Powers in the Middle East and their Struggle for Hegemony – Dr. Alberto Gasparetto**

In the literature of middle powers, much attention has been paid to such “established” middle powers as the “BRICS”, while the “emerging” middle powers are thoroughly underexplored. By considering the latter ones more revisionist than the former in terms of pursuing economic, military, cultural, religious and political goals to challenge the existing order, this paper focuses on how Iran and Turkey have exploited the Qatar crisis with the GCC in the context of a rearrangement of regional dynamics upon the Arab revolts in 2011. It especially focuses on Iran’s and Turkey’s struggle in gaining the upper hand over the regional hegemony vis-a-vis the GCC and its dominant player, Saudi Arabia. How have Iran and Turkey shaped their regional agenda to counterbalance Saudi’s outreach in the Middle East? How have Ankara and Tehran molded their reciprocal historical geopolitical competition around the Qatar crisis? How have they tried to both serve as role models based on their soft power and build new coalitions? What could be expected in the near future from such a regional restructuring resulting from a liquid and penetrated regional system? This paper relies on extensive reference to the recent landmark literature about middle powers in the Middle East to show how Turkey’s and Iran’s approach towards the GCC have pushed them to use the Qatar crisis to their respective advantage.

## **United We Stand? Measuring Threat Perception of Iran within the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi Axis – Cinzia Bianco**

Amid the eruption of the gravest intra-GCC crisis in the history of the organization in June 2017 – when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, supported by Egypt, cut all relations and closed all borders with Qatar – assumptions on shared threat perceptions across the GCC, largely driving the very establishment of the body, have been put into questions. Among other issues, the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have accused Qatar of aiding Tehran in its alleged plans of de-stabilizing the Gulf region to gain influence. While rebuking the accusations, Doha’s government has given numerous indications of seeking pragmatic relations with its Iranian neighbors. Likewise, Kuwait and Oman – officially neutral in the crisis – have been more hesitant than their fellow GCC states in characterizing Iran as a hostile power to be assertively confronted. However, beyond a simplistic divide along the intra-GCC crisis’ fault lines, reinforced in the rhetoric and narrative of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama, there are elements to argue for a more complex picture in the perceptions of Iran, with substantial differences at the level of each GCC state. In fact, this paper aims to show that, in the post-2011 context, strong divergences emerged also in the perceptions of the anti-Qatar camp with regards to the type, intensity and dimensions of the threat posed by Iran. The aim is to provide a more detailed analysis of the commonalities and differences in key policy-making drivers between what is often simplistically regarded as an emerging axis, that of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama.

## Introduction

*Prof. Anoush Ehteshami, Director of the Institute for Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*

Nearly four decades have passed since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The establishment of the GCC was arguably the boldest diplomatic and political act of the Gulf Arab monarchies to date. This handful of Arab monarchies, some of which were still emerging from the shadow of Britain, were often seen as vulnerable, timid, risk-averse, conservative actors who had been pushed and pulled in different directions by their much more powerful and demographically richer northern neighbors of Iran and Iraq and therefore unable (or unwilling) to act in concert in their collective interest. Their acute vulnerability, the argument went, made them subservient to the whims of their bigger neighbors and deeply reliant on the good offices of the West, primarily the United States from the mid-1970s, for survival. And yet, just 10 years after Britain's withdrawal from territories "east of Suez" they had shown the maturity to pool their resources to build the Arab region's first sub-regional organization. The earthquake in the Arab region which followed the announcement of the birth of the GCC had to be absorbed at a time when Syria, Iraq and Egypt – the Mashreq's Arab giants – were struggling to establish themselves as the dominant Arab actor while trying to contain the many fires now raging in the Arab region's heartland and borderlands in the Levant, the Persian Gulf, along the Red Sea, and in the Maghreb. The GCC had burst asunder the illusion of Arab unity and had, argued the monarchies' critics, decimated Arab ranks at a time when both Iran and Israel were assaulting them.

Yet, there was clear strategic imperative for the establishment of the GCC, the reasons for which are discussed in depth in the chapters that follow. The largest Arab monarchy, Saudi Arabia, was under severe pressure by Iran's energetic revolutionary leaders who were bent on showcasing the Kingdom as the embodiment of "American Islam", on the one hand, and also Iraq which wanted Riyadh's patronage, financial support, and political cover for its adventurous war which it started in September 1980 with Iran, on the other. Smaller Gulf Arab states, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular, were deeply exposed to the war machines of Iran and Iraq and were caught between the hard place of appeasing Iran and the rock of maintaining a modicum of distance from Iraq without offending President Saddam Hussein. Baghdad's narrative of containing Iran as an Arab duty was hard to counter, particularly when Tehran appeared to be going out of its way to challenge the sovereignty of some of the Gulf monarchies and the well-being of others. Common threat perceptions facilitated cooperation on a new scale.

The GCC survived the hostilities of the 1980s, and pulled more tightly together when one of its members (Kuwait) was swallowed whole in August 1990 by Iraq and led the Arab campaign to liberate Kuwait from the clutches of the Iraqi armed forces. In the 1990s the GCC became increasingly proactive and reached out to the rest of the world as a single unit,

beginning bilateral negotiations with the European Union (EU) for customs-free trade and with other countries for economic cooperation. A “Khaliji” identity exclusive to the GCC was being born with empathy and affinity and shared values, customs, and outlooks as its trademarks. Annual summits reinforced GCC oneness and provided the forum for ironing out differences as well as for showing the world the utility of unity amongst the Gulf monarchies. The 1990s, thus, was devoted to consolidation and deeper integration. Free movement of people and capital to add to GCC-wide employment opportunities and customs-free trade, leading in the 2000s to discussions of establishing a GCC central bank (Riyadh or Abu Dhabi?!), a single currency, and further advances towards a “union” of the Gulf monarchies. With other regional organizations (the Arab Maghreb Union and the Arab League, namely) moribund the GCC appeared to be shining the way towards successful (sub)regionalization on a grand scale, to mirror the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in southeast Asia and the EU in Europe.

The success of the GCC as a regional organization at the same time also strengthened its individual parts, encouraging its smaller members to deploy their considerable accumulated wealth in their narrower national interests. This phenomenon fully manifested itself in the post-2010 Arab uprisings which inexplicably pitted GCC state against another in other Arab arenas. But the geopolitical tensions following the Arab uprisings also cemented divisions within the GCC itself, pushing some of its members further and further apart and leaving the non-partisan members of the Council bereft of sub-regional leadership. The divisions, partly fueled by developments elsewhere in the region, has led to open hostilities between Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on the other side, weakening the very foundations of the GCC. Ironically, at a time when Iran is again encroaching, Iraq being a shadow of its former self, Yemen burning to a cinder, and al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their derivatives pressing against GCC countries, these (largely) stable and well-endowed Arab countries are spending their time managing their own inter-state quarrel side-show! There are complex reasons, some of which are rooted in the history of state formation in the Arab region, for the tensions surfacing now between these countries. But empowerment of the GCC’s smaller states, competition for wider influence between some of them, and the general securitization of inter-state relations across the Middle East has contributed to the deepening of the crisis engulfing the GCC, which has not been helped by elite-level rivalries, personal ambition, and the pursuit of prestige politics.

Yet, if the GCC was not here I think we would have had to invent it to meet the deep and diverse challenges of this century. The GCC’s moment in history, as an engine of positive change, a model of friendship, and a vehicle for constructive engagement, is now. But sadly this organization appears to have fallen victim to the conditions which defeated all other Arab organizations which went before it. Forty years of the GCC should be a moment for pause, reflection and also celebration, for what has been achieved since the heady days of the 1980s, the ambitions of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the purposeful movement towards Khalijism. In a region as deeply divided and dysfunctional as this one, the GCC has had an important and positive role to play – for itself and also in the interest of the wider region – and while for some it is still an anti-Arab forum that keeps Arab divisions alive, for

many others the GCC's success is a beacon of hope for Arab integration efforts and for wider regional prosperity. When 2021 is upon us, I hope very much that we will not be reading the obituary of this most successful of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional organizations, or to be seeing it as irrelevant – a fate worse than its formal dissolution.

In this fantastic volume, edited by one of my wonderful PhD students and largely written by a community of graduate students, we are privileged to have the thoughts of Dr. Abdullah Baabood who traces the origins of the GCC, its ebbs and flows, and its prospects going forward as the opening chapter of the book. Our contributors then explore in some detail the policies and priorities of GCC states, the tensions within and across the organization, and behavioral traits of its key actors. Several papers also pay close attention to the GCC's interactions with the wider region and in particular such countries as Iran and Turkey. Finally, the debates of the day were brought together in a thought-provoking roundtable, which explored a wide variety of factors and actors in the life of the GCC. As the GCC approaches middle age, facing so many internal, regional and wider international challenges, I was struck by how as a group we were so fully focused on the future of the organization, what its existence has meant for its members, and the rich legacy of cooperation and exchange which it has created. As some panelists and members of the audience noted, despite its internal crisis it is too simple to just write the GCC off when juxtaposed against its accomplishments of the previous 40 years and the many challenges the GCC countries as a group will be facing in a world in which power is in transition and the balance of global power on the move, from the traditional partners of the GCC in the West to bigger economic partners in Asia. It seemed clear from our deliberations at the conference that the Gulf Arab monarchies will need such an umbrella as the GCC if they are to navigate with success the environmental, geopolitical, strategic, diplomatic and of course security challenges of this century. But only time will tell if they did grasp the nettle and in the interest of the group set aside narrower national priorities. This is easier said than done of course given the depth of the crisis between four members of the Council and the very high stakes by which the parties are playing the regional geostrategic game of the post-2010 regional order.

## **The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its Future Prospects**

**Dr. Abdullah Baabood**

### **Introduction**

Integration within the Arab world began in 1945 with the establishment of the Arab League. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was one of a number of regional arrangements initiated in the Middle East during the 1980s involving the governments of most of the Arab states with the aim of enhancing Arab unity (Note 1). However, “regionalism” within the Arab world has had a rather chequered history largely because of the ambiguity of the terms in Arab political discourse. The GCC as a regional organization, made up of six of the monarchies of Arab states of the Gulf, was established in 1981 and excluded Iraq and Yemen. Another regional organization, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which grouped together five Arab states of the North African littoral, followed in 1989. A third organization, the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC), almost simultaneously sprang into existence in the middle of the Arab world which included four Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and then-Yemen Arab Republic) that had been excluded from the GCC and the AMU; its existence, however, was short-lived mainly due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990 and the events that followed thereafter.

The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf hereinafter referred to as the Cooperation Council was created on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1981, as regional organization that consisted of six-member states; Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The rationale for its creating was the existing strong ties of special relations, common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam which bind them; and the conviction that coordination, cooperation, and integration between them serve the sublime objectives of the Arab Nation (GCC Website, nd).

The Charter lays down the GCC’s basic objectives, which include promoting cooperation among the countries of the Gulf region, strengthening relations between them, and achieving coordination and integration across a range of diverse fields (GCC Website, nd).

The GCC Charter stipulated that the basic objectives of the GCC are: To effect coordination, integration and inter-connection between Member States in all fields in order to achieve unity between them; to deepen and strengthen relations, links and areas of cooperation now prevailing between their peoples in various fields; and to formulate similar regulations in various fields.

As an intergovernmental body, the GCC has developed over the years to create a relatively successful regional group that has made many achievements. Since its foundation the GCC has entered into several common agreements and joint projects.

However, the GCC, which came about mainly because of internal and external security threats to the oil-rich but vulnerable monarchies of the Gulf in the 1980s represents the most successful attempt, relatively speaking, at regional integration in the Arab world. Integrative efforts within the GCC – which began in the early 1980s – are, however, still shallow and at in at an infancy stage. Although the GCC Charter envisaged that cooperation would “achieve unity” between the states, in practice there have been few manifestations of such an ambition.

The GCC integration process lends itself more to a regional regime/organization based on explicit intergovernmental cooperation and policy coordination rather than moving towards a federal system that transfers competencies to supranational bodies. In this respect, the GCC offers these states a halfway house for cooperation and a forum for consultation and cooperation especially on security and energy policy, where the states form an important bloc within OPEC (Notes 2).

The GCC integration process was faced with an obstinate adherence to state sovereignty and the narrow pursuit of state interests (Munch, 1996; Tripp, 1995). The slow pace of GCC economic integration, particularly the lack of progress with the Customs Union and the disagreement over the Common External Tariff (CET), has hindered GCC negotiations with its trading partners and had certainly become a “pretext” for EU abstention from entering into a free trade agreement. The GCC Customs Union was launched in 2003 in an effort to help facilitate trade negotiations between the two groups, as it would ostensibly mean a region-to-region free trade agreement (FTA) rather than a series of bilateral ones (Kostadinova). However, the FTA negotiations were suspended in 2008 due to Saudi export duties (Habboush, 2010; Alandejani, 2018).

The level of integration, institutional mismatch and the ineffectiveness of the dialogue institutions in each group have inevitably adversely affected EU-GCC interregional cooperation. Due to such obstacles, the EU-GCC dialogue has lost momentum and direction and the high hopes on both sides have been brought down to earth by the realities of the international political economy.

While the GCC level of integration has negatively affected its negotiations with its international partners, the GCC made some noticeable achievements in coordinating and harmonizing some policies at economic, security, social and cultural spheres in the last four decades of integration.

The GCC was in fact developing as one of the most successful regional projects and integration experiences in the Middle East. There was a hope that the GCC success, with its enormous wealth, would enhance security and stability and economic development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and act as a lightning rod for further similar integration projects.

The GCC states control 29% of the world's crude oil reserves, highlighting the relative global importance of the Gulf petroleum sector. GCC states also held 22.3% of the world's natural gas reserves. Fueled by massive oil revenues, the value of GCC real GDP was USD 1,479.3 billion in 2017 enjoying one of the world's highest GDP per capita. State Revenues are largely driven by exports of hydrocarbons that stood at USD 345 billion in 2018 (U-Capital, 2018). In addition, the GCC states' financial surpluses and sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) are among the highest in the world, adding more weight to these countries' influence in terms of international finance. Currently, combined GCC funds have reached close to USD 2.9 trillion in total assets, which accounts for almost 40% of total global sovereign wealth funds.

The Gulf states play an outsize role in the global economy (Rachman, 2017). The six-member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council represent an important region from a trade point of view. The region is witnessing an ongoing and momentous period of economic development, making it even more important for trade, investment, and work opportunities.

Indeed, if the GCC were to become one single market instead of six separate ones, it would be the ninth largest economy in the world today – similar in size to Canada and Russia and not far from India. If it is able to keep growing at an annual average of 3.2% for the next 15 years, it could become the sixth largest economy in the world by 2030, hovering just below Japan (EY Growth Drivers Series, 2016).

In the economic sphere for example, the GCC established a Unified Economic Agreement in 1981, Custom Union in 2003 and the GCC Common Market in 2008. The organization also planned to introduce a monetary union and single currency by 2010, but the process was delayed due to political hurdles. The Common Market, which created a single market with free flow of goods, capital and people, along with the Customs Union provided an appropriate platform for collective free trade negotiations and strategic dialogues with global partners. Besides that, the GCC initiated some common projects including power grid connectivity and a common rail network.

Cooperation in the security field started with the foundation of the Peninsula Shield force (PSF) in 1982, followed by the Joint Defense Agreement in December 2000, supervised by a Joint Defense Council and a Military Committee and later in 2013 a Unified Military Command (Guzanksy, 2014). There are other further achievements in the social and

cultural, etc. as well as harmonization activities that has progressed due to the last 4 decades of integration.

Through a series of security and defense agreements, the GCC was able to create a security community among its member states adding to building a robust regional security mechanism. Individually and collectively, the GCC states have succeeded in maintaining multi-faceted economic, defense and security cooperation with international partners including the United States (US), European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China, India, etc. Such agreements have helped global economic cooperation and integration and aided in building further levels of security frameworks (Saidy, 2014).

However, the style of the integration model and the interstate conflicts has led not to only to slow down and cause delays in the integration process but also to occasional eruption of largely unresolved crisis within the GCC raising some questions about the future of this regional organization.

The GCC integration model and the interstate conflicts has led not to only to slow down and cause delays in the integration process but also to crisis within the GCC raising some questions about the future of this regional organization and undermines its rational.

### **The Reasons for and the Formation of the GCC**

While common security concerns especially after the end of Pax Britannica following the British withdrawal from the region in the early 1970s might well have been lurking behind the scenes at that time, other official statements and explanations indicate that a diverse set of contextual political, economic, social and cultural factors prompted the foundation of the GCC. The quest for regional security in the midst of political upheavals prompted these countries to consider different options for security cooperation especially as oil wealth began to attract more attention from their larger neighbors. The fall of the Arab regional system, the wider instabilities in Afghanistan and East Africa, and a Soviet-backed regime on the Arabian Peninsula (South Yemen), compounded the threat perceptions. Internal instability and the siege of Mecca may have also played a as a factor. Several economic cooperation projects between these wealthy but small Gulf states began well ahead of the GCC formation and the success of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) federation have also been positive factors. Similar political systems and the shared values and common bonds between the Gulf nations have contributed to the emergence of the GCC (Ramazani, 1988). While others point out that the GCC was also a response to internal and external developments and challenges that affected the region in the 1970s and 1980s, the more significant of factor is the Islamic revolution in Iran and the war between Iraq and Iran which created a window of opportunity for the small monarchical states of the Gulf to forge ahead with this regional organization particularly while their larger neighbors were engaged in a

war and the fear that the winner of which will play a major role dominating the region (al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2014).

Following the unsuccessful plans at forming some sort of an alliance within the Gulf region which would have included both Iran and Iraq, the smaller Gulf states forged ahead using this small window of opportunity to create an exclusive regional body that excluded both Iran and Iraq as well as Yemen which all had incompatible political systems. The timing and the speed at which the GCC was formed attests to this. The GCC was formed at a record time between the 4<sup>th</sup> of February and the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1981 (Ramazani, 1988). The announcement of the formation of the GCC on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1981 stated that:

“The decision was not a product of the moment but an institutional embodiment of a historical, social and cultural reality. Deep religious and cultural ties link the six states, and strong kin relations prevail among their citizens. All these factors, enhanced by one geographical entity extending from sea to desert, have facilitated contacts and interaction among them, and created homogeneous values and characteristics” (GCC Website, nd). Therefore, a drawing together in both practical cooperation and in an “instrumental use of [Gulf] identity in order to enhance their security” (Barnett and Gause, 1998) led to the GCC’s founding.

The statement added: “Therefore, while, on one hand, the GCC is a continuation, evolution and institutionalization of old prevailing realities, it is, on the other, a practical answer to the challenges of security and economic development in the area. It is also a fulfilment of the aspirations of its citizens towards some sort of Arab regional unity” (GCC Website, nd).

The GCC Charter that explains the rationale for its creation, its concept, objectives and organizational structure had to be constructed on a very short time scale to make use of this short window of opportunity.

The Charter stated that: “Being fully aware of the ties of special relations, common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam which bind them; and desiring to effect coordination, cooperation and integration between them in all fields; and, having the conviction that coordination, cooperation, and integration between them serve the sublime objectives of the Arab Nation; and, in pursuit of the goal of strengthening cooperation and reinforcement of the links between them; and in an endeavour to complement efforts already begun in all essential areas that concern their peoples and realize their hopes for a better future on the path to unity of their States; and in conformity with the Charter of the League of Arab States which calls for the realization of closer relations and stronger bonds; and in order to channel their efforts to reinforce and serve Arab and Islamic causes” (Ibid). Therefore, while, on one hand, the GCC is a continuation, evolution and institutionalization of old prevailing realities, it is, on the other, a practical

answer to the challenges of security and economic development in the area. It is also a fulfilment of the aspirations of its citizens towards some sort of Arab regional unity.

Article 4 states the GCC's basic objectives are "To effect coordination, integration and inter-connection between Member States in all fields in order to achieve unity between them. To deepen and strengthen relations, links and areas of cooperation now prevailing between their peoples in various fields. To formulate similar regulations in various fields including the following: economic and financial affairs, commerce, customs and communications education and culture. To stimulate scientific and technological progress in the fields of industry, mining, agriculture, water and animal resources; to establish scientific research; to establish joint ventures and encourage cooperation by the private sector for the good of their peoples" (Ibid).

Articles 6 of the Charter explains the Council organizational and institutional structure as follows:

#### *The Supreme Council*

The Supreme Council is the highest authority of the organization. It is composed of the heads of the Member-States. Its presidency rotates periodically among the Member States in alphabetical order. It meets in an ordinary session each year. Extraordinary sessions may be convened at the request of any one Member-State seconded by another Member State. At its summit held in Abu Dhabi in 1998, the Supreme Council decided to hold consultative meetings in between the last and the coming summit. To be valid a meeting must be attended by two-thirds of the Member-States (Article 6). Each Member State has one vote. Resolutions in substantive matters are carried by unanimous approval of participating member states in the voting. However, decisions on procedural matters are taken by the vote of the majority of the Supreme Council (Article 9).

Attached to the Supreme Council is the Consultative Commission of the Supreme Council, which is composed of thirty members, five members from each of the Member State, chosen for their expertise and competence for a term of three years. This body considers matters referred to it by the Supreme Council of the GCC. Beneath the Supreme Council is also the Dispute Settlement Commission which is constituted by the Supreme Council for each case of dispute arising out of the interpretation of the terms of the charter (article 10).

#### *The Ministerial Council*

The Ministerial Council is composed of the Foreign Ministers of all the Member States or other ministers deputizing for them. The Council is presided over by the Member State which presided over the last ordinary session of the Supreme Council. It convenes its ordinary sessions once every three months. An extraordinary session can be convened at

the invitation of any one Member State seconded by another Member State. A session is valid if attended by two-thirds of the Member States (Article 11).

The functions of the Ministerial Council include, among other things, formulating policies and making recommendations for promotion of cooperation among the Member States and achieving coordination among the Member-States for implementation of the ongoing projects. It submits its decisions in the form of recommendations to the Supreme Council for its approval. The Ministerial Council proposes and the Supreme Council disposes. The Ministerial Council is also responsible for preparations to hold meetings of the Supreme Council and prepare its agenda. The voting procedure in the Ministerial Council is the same as in the Supreme Council (Article 12).

### *The Secretariat General*

The functions of the Secretariat General are broadly the preparation of special studies relating to cooperation, coordination, planning and programming for common action, preparation of periodical reports regarding the work done by the GCC, following up the implementation of its own decisions, preparation of reports and studies on the demand of either the Supreme Council or the Ministerial Council, making arrangements for holding of the meetings of various organs, finalization of their agenda and drafting resolutions (Article 15).

The Secretariat General is composed of the following:

- The Secretary-General: He is appointed by the Supreme Council for a term of three years renewable for another term.
- Eight Assistant Secretaries-General: They deal with the functional areas under the jurisdiction of the GCC, like political, economic, military, security, humanitarian, environmental, legal, media, cultural affairs, information, finance and administration, strategic dialogue and negotiations. They are appointed by the Ministerial Council on the nomination of the Secretary-General for a renewable term of three years. The Secretariat General also includes the head of the GCC Delegation to the European Union at Brussels and the head of the GCC Delegation to the United Nations.
- The Directors-General of the functional divisions of the Secretariat and all other subordinate employees: all of them are appointed by the Secretary General.

The functional structure of the Secretariat General covers a number of specialized and supportive areas like political, economic, military, security, humanitarian, and environmental affairs; finance and management, strategic dialogue and negotiations, intellectual property rights, the Office of the Technical Secretariat for Anti-dumping, the Technical Office of Communications located in the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Office of the

Consultative Commission located in the Sultanate of Oman. The delegates of the missions of the GCC to the European Union and the United Nations form part of the administrative personnel of the Secretariat.

The haste at which the creation of GCC was envisioned and created and the sensitivities of the newly independent member states that were still jealous and protective of their independence and sovereignty reflected on the objectives of the regional organization and on its charter and its institutional make up. The objectives remain vague with no explanation on how to achieve the goal of “unity” as came in the Charter. There is unclarity as to the model of integration and the process with a muddling through intergovernmental cooperation. The organizational structure was limited with no well-defined integration structure and a lack of a supra-national body to enhance this goal. Unlike the European Commission in the European Union, the Secretariat General, as the name suggests, functions mainly as a secretary for the member states in coordinating their meetings and implementing their decisions with no institutional power to effect common policies, decisions and directives. Dysfunctional institutional makeup was built in the organization from its onset. The Dispute Settlement Commission was never created to deal with intra-state disputes, nor to arbitrate on the failure of implementing the GCC decisions and directives. The lack of a functioning dispute resolution mechanism hindered much of the progress and opened the door for misunderstandings and conflicts to foster and grow. Decisions of the Supreme Council and GCC agreements lacked both an implementing body with supranational powers and a regional mechanism to interpret these decisions and avert misunderstandings and disputes. There is also an apparent lack of a GCC court of justice to rule, arbitrate and adjudicate on disputes. The Consultative Commission of the Supreme Council stood in time as a purely nominated non-elected body with no public representation or decision-making powers. Its role was purely consultative on matters referred to it by the Supreme Council. Cooperation remained purely inter-governmental with no useful direct input from the public or the private sector. The GCC kept functioning since its creation for almost four decades with hardly any reform of its Charter or its institutions. The lack of a vision, or a model was also accompanied with a lack of devoted leaders or “champions” advocating for deeper regional integration and no spill-over effects from industrial sectors or public support.

Moreover, the GCC membership is skewed in favor of Saudi Arabia. Compared to the other five-member states, Saudi Arabia is an outlier because of the size of its territory, population, military power, and economy, as well as the soft power it derives from its role as the custodian of the two holiest sites in Islam. Saudi Arabia plays a leading and dominating role in the GCC and uses the organization as an extension of its foreign policy (Miller, 2017). The Saudi role has created an obstacle to the GCC cohesion as the smaller GCC states’ fear of Saudi hegemony. In addition to the Saudis’ weight in the organization, the GCC secretariat is located in Riyadh, as well as the military organization, Peninsula Shield (PSF), that has

traditionally been based at Hafr al-Batin and headed by a Saudi major general. The country's growing international and regional status, encourages its leadership and its nationals to sometimes overplay its role and draw attention to its increasing influence, with some proclaiming that its recent initiatives have elevated it to "the capital of Arab decision making" (Martini et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, that this increases the sense of fear of the other five junior partners that Saudi Arabia has intentions to relegate the other five to junior members of the group and they simply play along without much conviction in increasing GCC integration (Ibid).

Among factors that limit GCC cohesion, sovereignty concerns cast the longest shadow. Historically, the smaller Gulf states have shifted between acquiescing to Saudi Arabia as the natural leader of the Arab Gulf while cultivating relationships with external powers as a hedge against Saudi hegemony. The states within the GCC best known for this approach was Kuwait in the 1980s, which succeeded in playing off global and regional powers to increase its weight in regional affairs, Qatar since 1996 especially in supporting the Arab Spring in 2011 and Oman with its independent foreign policy particularly its good relations with Iran, often annoying Saudi Arabia in the process. The GCC countries' protection of their independent decision-making has hindered the ability of the GCC to create, influence, and implement common political goals.

In addition, historical, dynastic rivalries and territorial antagonisms between member states arising from time to time causing further mistrust and hindering cohesion (Guzansky, 2016). However, despite its institutional weaknesses, there were some noticeable achievements of the regional cooperation that the GCC has facilitated and was instrumental in implementing.

### **An Overview of the GCC's Achievements**

Since its inception in 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has sought to foster and facilitate cooperation between the six Gulf monarchies in a number of key sectors, most notably in the areas of political, military, security and economic cooperation.

Although the GCC was established for security reasons, economic cooperation took precedence. As soon as the GCC was founded, the Unified Economic Agreement of 1981 was signed with the aim of achieving economic nationality among the GCC citizens, as well as achieving economic integration among Member States in gradual steps, beginning with the establishment of the Free Trade Area. However, for the most part economic integration was put on the back burner until the 2000s. In 2001, the GCC Supreme Council set the following goals: Customs union in January 2003, Common market by 2007, Common currency by 2010.

In 2002 the six-member states pegged their currencies to the US Dollar followed by the implementation of a Customs Union in 2003 allowing for the free movement of goods

among the GCC States without customs or non-customs restrictions as well as a Common Customs Law and a Common External Customs Tariff. The GCC Customs Union was launched in 2003 in an effort to help the process of the negotiations of the free trade agreement with the European Union. However, no agreement was reached on how the custom revenues is to be shared among the member states. A common market was launched in January 2008 allowing full equality among GCC citizens to work in the government and private sectors of all GCC states as well as access to social insurance, retirement coverage, real estate ownership, capital movement, education, health and other social services in all member states (Abdulqader, 2015; UAE Federal Customs Authority, nd).

In 2010, the GCC states agreed to found a monetary union leading to a common currency but talks stalled in 2010 after Oman and the UAE's withdrawal from the proposal and the target date continues to be adjusted in the light of political and practical problems (Roule, 2018; Trenwith, 2014). Lessons from the Eurozone crisis in 2011, and the problems caused by weak adherence to convergence criteria and poor fiscal management in countries able to operate without the enforcement of common financial management mechanisms, have further weakened the desire to move ahead in the GCC.

It should be noted, though, that there have been some regional infrastructural developments that could literally help in the integration process of the GCC member states. However, the development of around 40,000 km of rail network across the GCC with over USD 200 billions of investment in national rail project and the of creation of a GCC rail authority, was delayed because of residual intra-state tensions between the member states (Sophia, 2015). This project would facilitate interstate travel throughout the GCC and possibly to Europe via Syria and Turkey and is set to improve tourism and trade across the region and reduce fuel consumption. The Khobar based GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA) has developed the common GCC electricity grid which is shared by all six-member states which. This is a potentially valuable economic and strategic development, given the constraints on meeting domestic energy needs for much of the GCC. It is believed that the common grid will aid the development of national rail capability as well. Other common economic projects include the connection of water grids which is set for completion in 2020 (Al-Saidi and Saliba, 2019: 455p. However, doubts exist on the viability of some of these mega GCC projects because of inter-state disputes and conflicts.

Furthermore, talks began in 2008 for a free trade agreement with Europe, however despite cooperation between the EU and GCC on trade and investment issues, macro-economic matters, climate change, energy, environment and research, no free trade agreement has yet been implemented (European Commission, nd). Saudi Arabia, for instance, has used its weight to dominate the GCC stance on negotiations with the EU. Saudi deputy finance minister Hamid Bazie, and not a GCC official, has led the GCC side and was able to wear a GCC in its problematic negotiations with the EU. It was noted that "The contacts that did

exist went through the GCC, where Saudi Arabia, due to its clout (in economy, politics, military etc.) could effectively direct the GCC's negotiations and decisions from within" (al-Duraiby, 2009: 170). Saudi Arabia sees the collective GCC framework as a way of maximizing its national weight in negotiations with the economically powerful EU. While collective empowerment is partly the logic for states that join the EU, Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent the less powerful GCC states utilize the collective weight of this external relationship, but without being prepared to concede significant national authority in the process.

Economic achievements enabled the GCC to produce momentum for a project that was otherwise floundering. From the outset, the style and nature of GCC integration was more suitable to economic cooperation than to a security partnership, let alone being willing to compromise their national sovereignty by integrating their security or defense functions or coordinating their foreign policies.

It must be noted though that there were efforts at harmonizing policies and regulations which are important prerequisite for further integration. There is an expanding number of GCC technical committees, drawing together ministers or other relevant officials from member states, which reflects a common desire to regularize and expand the harmonization efforts. However, government policy is largely driven by national governments and guarded by state sovereignty. As noted by Neil, "Member state governments have embraced a modest pooling of sovereignty for the common (economic) good. However, set against the impression of a 'communitaire' feeling is a statism at the heart of the economic decision-making structure" (Neil, 2011: 10).

In terms of security cooperation, the GCC established the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), a joint military venture based in Saudi Arabia, in 1984. In 2009 the Peninsula Shield Force was reinforced with a rapid intervention force which proved effective in protecting government infrastructure during the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Bahrain (Alajmi, 2015; Encyclopedia Britannica, nd). In addition to this, an intelligence sharing pact signed in 2004 helped to improve security coordination between the GCC states. At the Manama Summit in 2000 the GCC states adopted the GCC Joint Defense Agreement, which paved the way for greater military cooperation between the six states, including plans to introduce a unified defense vision, unified military command and a Gulf missile shield. The GCC has its dedication to continually developing its military and security cooperation to meet regional security needs, upgrading the arms and the number of troops in the Peninsula Shield Force in times of regional instability such as the emergence of Daesh and the Houthi uprising in Yemen. Another important achievement was the resolution taken during Kuwait summit in 1997, which entailed to link the GCC Member States with a military communication network for early warning (Global Security, nd).

However, despite such developments in security and defense cooperation, the GCC by its nature the GCC has not been able to form a credible military force to defend itself and has created at best a heterogeneous security organization that continues to depend on external security umbrella (Koch, 2010). Thus, the GCC is not anticipated to become a security community in the near future (Barnett and Gause, 1998).

Despite some noticeable development in the GCC cooperation and some achievements and the enlargement of the bureaucracy of the Secretariat General as well as creating other functional bodies, the organization stagnated and lacked cohesion, suffering at times of paralysis in decision-making and incapable of implementing agreements. The GCC, thus, continues to suffer from numerous hurdles, obstacles, exclusivity and occasional disputes that hinders future integration.

### **The GCC's Challenges, Obstacles and Disputes**

Despite some visible measures of achievements, the GCC faced several obstacles, disputes and crisis that slowed down or hindered its development and its overall cohesion (Hassan, 2015). The main factors obstructing GCC cohesion, future cooperation and integration are sovereignty reluctance and sensitivities (Edwards and Baabood, 2008), differing threat perceptions (Gause, 2007; Kahwaji, 2003), imbalance within the GCC and fear of Saudi hegemony (Martini et al, 2016), the lack of economic compatibility, and low-level of economic interdependence and diversification (Coates Ulrichsen, 2017). In addition, the GCC integration style and model which was based on inter-governmental and leadership cooperation than real and deep integration lacking both supranational regional institutions and conflict resolutions mechanisms has rendered the regional organization less effective (Neil, 2011). These factors have operated as constraints on the GCC's development, and are manifest in members' resistance to integrate their economies or key military systems, cede foreign affairs decision-making to an overarching body, or establish an efficient organization. The economic agreements almost stagnated and there were many differences in foreign policy orientations including supporting opposing forces in regional conflicts and seeking bilateral agreements with external regional partners rather than committing to negotiate as a bloc on economic or security matters. This is evident on the stresses on the GCC unity over endgames to the Yemen and Syria conflicts as well as relations with Iran and agreements with NATO.

Since its inception nearly four decades ago, the GCC has faced several main challenges. These include the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the spillover effect of the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War. The Iraqi invasion of a GCC member state, Kuwait, in 1990 exposed their security vulnerability and demonstrated their dependence on the United States. The liberation of Kuwait in 1991 and subsequent diplomatic efforts with the United States and the United Nations dominated the GCC agenda in the 1990s. The third challenge was the 2001 terrorist

attacks on the United States, which precipitated the US war on terror and ultimately led to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The GCC did not play an active role in the American battle against al-Qaeda or in the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. The fourth upheaval, the Arab Spring in 2011, initially motivated the GCC to explore opportunities to reshape the Middle East. However, this convergence of interests was short-lived, and differing understandings of the Arab uprisings could now lead to the GCC's demise – or at least its irrelevance as an institution. With Iraq, Egypt, and Syria no longer the Arab world's political centers of gravity, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC countries became the last standing pillars of power. From 2011 to 2014, and to varying degrees, GCC states played decisive roles in the fast-paced uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia. The GCC also had an ambitious agenda to strengthen and expand its membership. In 2011 as well, and most likely as a response to the Arab Spring protests, there was a proposal for enlarging the GCC by inviting Jordan and Morocco to join the organization, but nothing of that nature transpired (Smith, 2011). This was followed by 2011 proposal to create a "Gulf Union" to deal with Iran's growing influence, but Saudi wishful thinking faced the reality that member states wanted to retain their independence (El Gamal, 2013). Although the GCC, acted decisively in Bahrain by deploying troops from its Peninsula Shield Force to end the country's uprising and contributed USD 10 billion each to Bahrain and Oman in 2011 to address their socioeconomic issues and subsequently in Libya, there were apparent differences and frictions in dealing with other post-Arab Spring countries (Laessing and Johnson, 2011; Macaron, 2018).

Indeed, divergence between the GCC states is not a new phenomenon and differing viewpoints have sometimes led to disagreements between GCC member states. Like other regional organizations, the GCC, has seen its fair share of ruptures and disagreements that have caused bilateral crises, leading to the withdrawal of one ambassador or another, as was the case when Saudi Arabia recalled its envoy to Qatar in 2002, the 2014 disagreement between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other, or the current and ongoing crisis that erupted on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2017 where Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and started an unprecedented boycott/blockade against the country (al Jazeera, 2019). The blockade against Qatar does not only violate the letter and the spirit of the regional organization but it also impinges on the fundamental principles of its core values, objectives and agreements. Thus, rendering the GCC ineffective in the management and the resolution of the conflict but also effectively freezing most of its activities and undermining its regional and international status.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, the three GCC member states involved in the blockade, have totally ignored the organizational mechanisms for conflict resolution to deal with their grievances over Qatar's policies demonstrates that the trust in the organization appears to have vanished. Obviously the longer this crisis lingers the more entrenched the division becomes and the harder it will become for both a smooth reconciliation and for the GCC to

regain its credibility. Largely due to this crisis, there are signs and beliefs that the GCC has lost trust if not momentum and its member states, although still trying to hold on to it, have started to consider other options not least the bilateral agreements between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well as Kuwait through forming Coordinating Committees in “all military, political, economic, trade and cultural fields” (Krieg, 2017; Wintour, 2017). These bilateral committees are constructed in such a way as to punish and reward members of the organization and are not necessarily meant to create a two-speed or a “variable geometry” GCC, but they seem to be constructed to intentionally isolate Qatar further and perhaps other member states that do not follow the Saudi-Emirati line. Rather than enhancing further GCC integration, these bilateral moves could deter future region-wide development efforts and sound the potential death knell for the GCC (Baabood, 2019).

The current crisis has emphasized the incoherence of the GCC as an organization in deepening further its integration process, improving its governance structure especially in dealing with disputes among member states or widening its membership. The crisis has also vindicated the long-held view that Saudi Arabia, being the largest and most powerful member of the GCC, is using the organization to dominate the smaller members.

The decision for blockading Qatar was not taken at the GCC level and two GCC member states, Kuwait and Oman, were also not consulted or taken part in the blockade. Instead, they choose not to take sides and Kuwait, supported by Oman continued their efforts to foster mediation and reconciliation without much success so far. The blockade did not only have an adverse effect on the social, economic and political relations of the GCC states and the wider region but it also runs against the spirit of the much-vaunted achievement of the GCC Common Market signed in 2007, which created a common free trade area and facilitated the free flow of people, goods and capital between its member states (Federation of Chambers of the GCC, 2018). The blockade has impaired the GCC Common Market as, for example, the abrupt closure of Qatar’s only land boundary effectively stopped the flow of goods and cut the country of its immediate neighbors.

The current crisis has also revealed the limitation and exposed the vulnerability of the GCC as it was completely side-lined and its absence from virtually every stage of the dispute rendered it to be almost irrelevant. In this sense, the decision to impose a blockade, which affects and disturbs common agreements, was not only taken outside the GCC and its problem-solving mechanisms, but the Gulf Cooperation Council has been completely ignored during this conflict. The GCC was excluded as the mechanism to discuss the dispute, communicate the initial grievances against Qatar and was not chosen as a facilitator of dialogue or mediator between the disputing members. It was even unable to prevent potential military escalation, which was a possibility – as stated by Kuwaiti Emir Sabah al-

Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah during a September 2017 press conference at the White House with US President Donald Trump (Arab News, 2017; The White House, 2017).

This blockade has not only severely impaired the GCC's own cooperation, integration and common projects, but it has also reflected negatively on its credibility in international cooperation with other regional and international countries and organizations. It highlights the volatility and vulnerability of the GCC as a regional organization and raises serious questions and concerns about its future role as a collective group.

## **Conclusion**

The GCC is one of the most successful regional integration projects in a region that has been plagued by conflicts and disputes. Despite its modest achievements, the GCC has been a welcome force for stability, security and development. Regional integration projects are known to be slow and the road to achieve cohesion is treacherous and full of obstacles and hurdles. This true especially in the Gulf region that has a long history of disputes and state sovereignty is of utmost importance. However, there are inbuilt problems within the GCC Charter, its objectives and its decision-making institutions as well as in its membership.

Looking forward, many of the same factors that bound and divided the GCC states since its existence are likely to remain operative. Added to those will be the near certainty of a generational change in leadership given the advanced age of current leaders, a potential shift in the regional security order based on Iran's evolving role in it, and further pressures to adapt to changes in global markets that include potential shifts in demand for energy.

Although these changing conditions are not likely to break the pattern of GCC cohesion that has characterized the bloc since it was established in 1981, they nevertheless will test its resolve and resiliency. Regional organizations don't normally die quickly and disappear overnight, but they tend to linger and wither away and become irrelevant if not attended to. These developments will undoubtedly make GCC redundant if these issues are not resolved quickly and there are no signs of that happening any time soon. For the GCC to survive, animate and regain its relevance, it will need to address these developments and challenges and find ways out of the debacle it finds itself in. The GCC Charter, objectives, institutions, decision-making and even its membership will need to be re-thought and reconsidered.

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## Notes

Note 1. Arab nationalists believed during the heyday of Arab nationalism (*al-Qawmiyya al-Arabiya*) in the 1950s and 1960s that the idea of a single Arab nation was imminently achievable, and, therefore regionalism (*al-Iqlimiyya*) or sub-regionalism was contrasted with

nationalism, where regionalism was viewed with suspicion and was only accepted if its intention was to achieve this aim.

Note 2. Not all GCC States are members of OPEC (Bahrain and Oman are not, because Oman's production is relatively small and Bahrain's almost negligible) but they are all members of OAPEC and coordination between these states, which are responsible for over 52% of OPEC's production and 70% of total Middle East production, is important for protecting their interest. The GCC States have not always followed OPEC's policy.

## The Evaluation of the GCC from the Perspective of Small State Studies

Dr. Máté Szalai

### Introduction

Forming alliances and joining international organizations (IOs) is a crucial tool for small states in order to ensure their survival, well-being and interests. Small states are also important for IOs – they usually constitute the majority of members, they provide legitimacy to collective decisions and they can contribute to the daily operations of the cooperation. Consequently, if there are serious tensions between small and large members of a community, an IO can easily find itself in trouble.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a primary example. Depending on the definition, at least four members of the GCC (namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman) are small states. The history of the organization is filled with episodes (e.g. the Kuwait War, or the Qatar crisis) which relate to size differences between members or to survival strategies of small states. That is why the suitability of the GCC for small states and the role size differences play in (dis)integration dynamics is highly important to investigate.

The paper aims at answering these questions using the framework of small state studies (SSS) (Note 1). I will start with arguing that the GCC has a three-fold nature which makes it a security alliance, a functional integration and an identity provider at the same time. Afterwards, I will investigate the suitability of the Council from these three viewpoints, building on the theoretical observations of SSS. In conclusion, I will reflect on the current Gulf rift and try to identify the effects of tensions related to size differences. The main argument is that the GCC has two structural problems related to size – first, if security perceptions differ, the small states lack the interest to accept Saudi leadership, and second, the GCC is unable to limit the competition between the small states themselves. These two notions rendered the Council an ineffective institution.

In the framework of the analysis, I will use a quantitative conceptualization of small states (East, 1973; Muhindo and Calenzo, 2011), arguing that the label refer to those states whose capacities in terms of four dimensions (territory, population, economic output and military capacities) are below the average of a given region (Note 2). If we regard both the GCC and the Middle East as a region (Note 3), we can see on Table 1 that Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar all meet the criteria in both regions, while Saudi Arabia achieves none. The case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a little bit more complex – its economic output and defense budget is higher than the average in both regions, while its population is slightly larger than

the GCC average. If we analyze historical data, we can see that until the 1990s, the UAE had actually been a small state in both regions, but since that, it has outgrown its status in some aspects. As a result, I will only call the four aforementioned states small.

**Table 1:** The size of the GCC states compared to the Middle Eastern and the GCC average (2017)

	<b>Territory</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Economic output</b>	<b>Defense budget</b>	<b>Size of armed forces</b>
Middle East av.	451 666	26 792 600	233 041 336 953	11 931 148 156	213 400
GCC av.	426 736	9 207 157	243 764 149 244	18 493 282 255	71 333
Bahrain	778	1 492 584	35 432 686 170	1 396 808 511	19 000
Kuwait	17 820	4 136 528	120 126 277 613	6 831 115 986	25 000
Oman	309 500	4 636 262	70 783 875 163	8 686 605 982	47 000
Qatar	11 610	2 639 211	166 928 571 429	1 876 758 242	22 000
Saudi Arabia	2 149 690	32 938 213	686 738 400 000	69 413 333 333	252 000
UAE	71 020	9 400 145	382 575 085 092	22 755 071 477	63 000

Source: Worldbank Database, 2017 (Note 4)

### **The Threefold Nature of the GCC**

To evaluate the GCC from the perspective of its small members, one has to define the nature of the organization first. In the framework of SSS, the main differentiation is made on the basis of the functions of such an organization – namely whether it is a security alliance, a functional economic integration or an identity provider. The three kinds should be evaluated differently.

Security alliances are considered to be crucial to provide the possibility of survival to small states (Gartner, 2001). Joining an alliance can be a form of either balancing or bandwagoning based on their relative power, threat perception or interests vis-à-vis the prevailing *status quo* (Bailes et al, 2016: 10-12). Either they have a conservative or revisionist strategy, small states are usually not equipped to cover the costs related to defending or changing the status quo, which is why they need more resourceful actors to pay the bill – in return, nonetheless, they can easily lost their leverage vis-à-vis their “protector” (Schweller, 1994). This leads as to the so-called alliance dilemma, which, according to Almezaini and Rickli (2017: 12-15) is more like a trilemma, a choice between security, influence and autonomy. Small states, goes the argument, can only pick two out of the three best case. That leads us to three possible strategies: alignment (choosing security and influence by joining a security alliance), the defensive strategy (preferring security and autonomy by claiming neutrality or engaging a loose alliance) and the offensive strategy

(choosing autonomy and influence by pursuing an independent and active foreign policy). Naturally, the optimal choice depends on many aspects, including the constellation behind the alliance (Wiberg, 1987) – a bilateral cooperation with a great power is markedly different than a multilateral one.

Besides the neorealist investigation of security alliances, the neoliberal analysis of functional integrations has rich tradition too. In general, small states prefer such institutions (Keohane, 1969) as they provide formal equality, limit the leverage of larger states, set legal rules for all members, and enables small states to participate in global governance. Moreover, small states can integrate economically into external markets, which helps them to balance the negative effects of having a small internal market (Alesina and Spolaore, 2005: 3). The extent to which a functional organization is beneficial for small states depends mostly on the following aspects:

- The integration dilemma: similarly to the alliance dilemma, a crucial choice has to be made at any kind of integration “between, on the one hand, preserving national autonomy and, on the other hand, seeking to influence” common “affairs through active participation” (Steinmetz and Wivel, 2010: 224). The extent of the dilemma can vary, mostly in relation with the decision-making processes (consensus- or majority-based mechanisms).
- Domestic economic structure: due to the distinct characteristics of the economy of a small state (e.g. over-reliance on foreign trade), the decision to engage in a cooperation is more sensitive (Dommen and Hein, 1985).
- Composition of the IO: according to empirical evidence (Schiff, 2002) integration dynamics oftentimes benefit larger members, which is why it is advisable for small states not to concentrate solely on negative (e.g. destruction of trade barriers) but on positive integration (e.g. join projects) too.

A third function of international organizations is to provide immaterial services for their member states. First, they represent and reproduce norms in the international system, which is quite important for small states as they “shape and influence (state) behaviour based on explicit or implicit commitments” (Grant and Hamilton, 2016: 164). By altering norms using IOs, resource-scarce entities can pursue their interest on the international level both vis-à-vis other members and non-members. Second, IOs help small states have their identity accepted (or challenge other states’ identity). Besides self-perceptions, identities always have an “intersubjective or systemic quality” (Wendt, 1999: 224) which refers to whether the outside environment accept the actor’s articulated identity. IOs can help in such an endeavour – e.g. the European Union legally aims at reinforcing European identity (European Union, 2016) or the League of Arab States allows Arab states to join the organization only (Arab League, 1945). Third, IOs can provide international legitimacy to a

specific set of actions (Wajner and Kacowicz, 2018). This comes handy for small states in two ways – they can push IOs to legitimize their actions or they can bargain with larger states to contribute to their legitimacy efforts.

Placing the GCC in one of the three categories is a difficult task (Abdulla, 1999: 155-58). Usually the document of establishment clears the nature of an organization, but the Council's Charter includes very vague notions, it makes "lofty" and "unfulfilled promises" (Legrenzi, 2011: 41) and leaves much to the imagination of the interpreter. The reason behind this ambiguity is that upon its creation, there were conflicting views about how the GCC should be established (Abdulla, 1999: 154-55; Legrenzi, 2011: 27-33): Oman preferred a military alliance against external threats, Kuwait would have focused more on economic and social integration, while Saudi Arabia wanted to focus on regime security. As a result of unresolved dilemmas and rushed negotiations, Charter was made to be accepted quickly and be filled with substance later. The document provides a flexible framework in which all member states find what they want to find, while it fails to set clear priorities and directions. Consequently, the GCC has a highly "hybrid nature" (Legrenzi, 2011: 41), containing elements of all three functions. This is why one has to evaluate the integration from all three perspectives.

## **The Evaluation of the GCC from the Perspective of Small States**

### *The GCC as a Security Alliance*

According to its Charter, the GCC is not a security alliance. In Article 4, which describes the objectives of the cooperation, neither defense nor other protective aims are enlisted. Nonetheless, due to the timing of its formation (Alasfoor, 2007: 33) and the creation of a supranational military force in 1986 (the Peninsula Shield Forces – PSF) (Pasha, 2012: 91-2), many conceptualize the integration "as a fairly loose and heterogeneous security community" (Abdulla, 1999: 157) mainly against the threat of Iran and Iraq (Bill, 1984: 123). As such, the GCC constitutes a multilateral alliance which includes four small states, one medium power and a great one, namely Saudi Arabia, aiming to balance against threats to the *status quo*.

Nonetheless, empirical evidence indicates that the members of GCC does not consider the Council to provide sufficient security guarantees. Three member states actually signed a defense agreement with Saudi Arabia one year after the signing of the Charter in 1982 outside of the GCC framework (Marschall, 2003: 36). The PSF is not an effective military force but rather a Saudi-led entity which serves as a mere symbol of togetherness (Legrenzi, 2011: 18). After the Kuwaiti war, almost all members of the GCC turned to the United States to sign defense agreements individually. In theory, this kind of bilateral cooperation is less

beneficial for small states than a multilateral cooperation as it deprives them of meaningful leverage. Their decision to favor the former one tells a lot about the perception of the GCC.

The main reason behind this phenomenon is the sub-optimal composition of the GCC which can best be understood in the alliance trilemma. Given the geopolitical exposure of small Gulf states to Saudi Arabia and the considerable size difference, engaging in any kind of security cooperation deprives small Gulf states of meaningful autonomy (or even influence) vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia in exchange for security. This can still be an acceptable bargain if two requirements are met – Riyadh is able and willing to protect small states and they all share the same threat perception.

By the 2010s, neither was true. While Saudi Arabia has always had greater military capacities than its smaller neighbors, but from a regional perspective, the Kingdom remained to be weak in comparison of military capabilities (Gause, 2014: 189). In contrast, it “behave[s] like the first among equals” (Pasha, 2012: 94), it pushes against those small states which defy its security considerations (e.g. the case of Qatar), and “attempts to dominate the strategic decision-making in the GCC” (Al-Bolushi, 2016: 392) but uses the GCC as a foreign policy tool to amplify its voice in the international arena. As a result, the Council fails to provide any of the three elements of the alliance trilemma – in this situation, “Saudi hegemony would be too high a price to pay for a truly integrated defense policy” (Legrenzi, 2011: 77).

The question of security perceptions is a more tricky one. One can easily see that in “moments of serious, region-wide crisis” (Kamrava, 2014: 176), the GCC is an effective security-provider (e.g. the Bahraini crisis of 2011 and the Yemeni one in 2012). Nonetheless, a general tendency since at least the 1990s is that the perception of traditional threats to Gulf security is getting more diverse inside the GCC. Iran is viewed as the major enemy by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, while Oman, Qatar and Dubai have geopolitical and economic incentives to cooperate with the Islamic Republic. Sunni political Islamists movement are feared in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, whereas Qatar has a good relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, while in Kuwait and Bahrain, they have played a legitimate role in domestic politics. While there is almost a consensus regarding radical extremist groups, the Saudi and the Qatari government has subsidized radical elements in Syria which cooperated with Jihadi networks (which was heavily criticized by the UAE). Strategic alignment is visible only between Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia momentarily.

The gap between security perceptions can be expected to stay or even widened in the future as it is a result of two systemic developments. First, the constantly changing regional environment led to more and more fragmented state interests in the MENA region in general, which puts pressure on all long-term security partnerships. States are likely to compete in shifting, overlapping alliances” which are “are likely to take more passing,

functional forms” (Kausch, 2014: 11). In such an environment, the GCC is inflexible. Second, the threats faced by Gulf states are more political than military in nature – Iraq does not pose a serious threat like it used to while Iran is more successful in intervening in domestic affairs through its networks. By their nature, the perception of political threats can change more easily as they depend on leadership or strategies more than on factual reality (Note 5).

### *The GCC as a Functional Cooperation*

The Charter clearly proclaims the GCC as a functional cooperation. In the Preamble, it is explicitly stated that the six founding members desire “coordination, cooperation and integration” between themselves. In Article 4, achieving unity is mentioned as an objective of the Council through formulating “similar regulations in various fields”, including economic and financial affairs, education, etc. (Arab League, 1945).

Substantially, the GCC managed to engage in economic integration (e.g. demolishing trade barriers, harmonizing regulations), conducting joint industrial and economic projects and coordinating key policies (Legrenzi, 2011: 57-72). The milestones in the cooperation (Pasha, 2012: 94-5; Bojarczyk, 2013: 82-3) have been the 1981 Unified Economic Agreement; the 1982 Gulf Investment Corporation and the Gulf Standards Organization; and the 2001 Economic Agreement. The gravest success of the GCC integration was the creation of a customs union in 2003 and the common market in 2008, though the complete abolishment of non-tariff barriers is yet to be achieved.

After that, the process seems to be stalling. When it comes to the introduction of the common Gulf currency, the leaders of the six states proclaimed in 2006 that it would happen until the end of the decade. While there are no technical obstacles to do so (Yang, 2009), the political will is still lacking. In 2016, the GCC states signed a deal to introduce a common value added tax of 5 percent by 2018, but only Saudi Arabia and the UAE met the deadline – Bahrain came third by January 2019, while others postponed the implementation so far (Regan, 2019).

As it was established in the first part, the value of a functional cooperation depends mainly on three aspects. The first is the extent of the integration dilemma captured in decision-making processes. From this perspective, the GCC structure favors small states. Except for procedural matters, voting in both the Supreme Council and the Ministerial Council is based on equality and unanimity. Decisions are only valid if four members are present, making small states circumventable. They are also able to shape the agenda – two members are enough to convene an extraordinary meeting, while the rotating presidency ensures that they can put topics on the table. It is also telling that practically small member states managed to delegate the secretary general (SG) for longer time than larger ones (see Table 2) – for 29 years out of the 38 since 1981, the SG was either a Bahraini, a Kuwaiti or a Qatari citizen. It is possible that the reason behind this phenomenon is the neglect of the position

by the Emirati and Saudi governments (due to its weakness), but it would be difficult to argue that delegating the SG does not create any sort of institutional leverage for small states.

**Table 2:** The number of years when GCC member states could delegate the secretary general

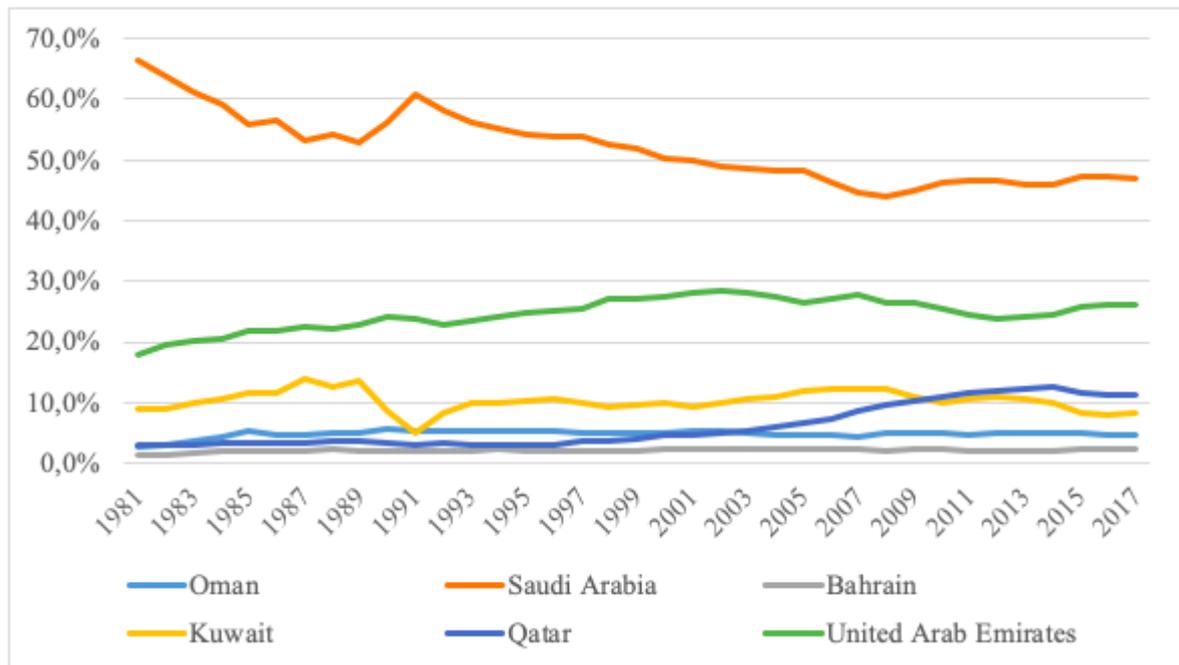
State	Period	Number of years
Bahrain	2011-	8
Kuwait	1981-1993	12
Oman	-	0
Qatar	2002-2011	9
Saudi Arabia	1996-2002	6
UAE	1993-1996	3

Source: al-Amina al-Sabikoon, 2019

The second aspect is the domestic economic structure of Gulf states, regarding which we can see a strong similarity in terms of specialization on hydrocarbon production, energy profile and over-reliance on foreign labor, among others (Bojarczyk, 2013). While one could argue that this serves as an incentive for integration, in practice it fosters competition instead for three reasons: coordination of production is usually handled on the OPEC or the OPAEC level (Legrenzi, 2011: 70: Note 6); there are no serious yields realizable through the integration of the “essentially self-propelled oil-based economies” of the GCC states (Abdulla, 1999: 166); and maybe most importantly, the economic agenda of the Gulf states is dominated by diversification which necessarily ignites competition (Abba, 2017) as the potential targeted sectors are usually the same (financial services, high-end tourism, etc.), especially among smaller Gulf states.

The third determinant of the desirability of the GCC is the distribution of power and of benefits of the integration. In this perspective, we can see a mixed picture. On the one hand, very similarly to the German role in the EU, the GCC favors Saudi Arabia which practically manages to lead the process of integration (al Tamamy, 2012: 147). On the other, economic tendencies since the creation of the GCC (see Chart 1) favor the rest. The share of Riyadh in the overall GDP of the GCC fell from 66.3% to 47%, while that of Qatar (3.1% to 11.4%) and the UAE (17.7% to 26.2%) rose sharply. This suggests a feel of irritation from the side of Saudi Arabia and deepening competition between the UAE and Qatar.

**Chart 1: The composition of the Gross Domestic Product of the GCC (1981-2017)**



Source: Worldbank Database, 2019

Last but not least, there are two aspects of the GCC which are highly beneficial for its small members. First, the institutions of joint industrial and economic projects (Legrenzi, 2011: 66-9), including the Gulf Investment Corporation or the Gulf Organization for Industrial Consulting, are based on equality (e.g. the shares are equally distributed) but they conduct several high-profile investments in the smaller member states. The second one is the regionalization of economic, professional and civil sphere (Legrenzi, 2011), which refers to the consequential intensification of bottom-up cooperation by different actors which is not directly coordinated by the governments. Consequently, “regionalism” in the GCC “is moving faster than cooperation among governments” (Albareda and Barba, 2011: 19). This process helps smaller Gulf states connect to each other, forming a more unified pool of human capacities, balancing the negative consequences of small size.

#### *The GCC as a Normative Actor*

The preamble of the GCC Charter is filled with references to shared norms, including the “common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam”; the eagerness to “serve the sublime objectives of the Arab Nation”. That being said, there are no specific jurisdiction given to the Council in these tasks, which is why the protection of a common identity is “not the main reason for the creation of the GCC”, though it “cannot be overlooked” (Albareda and Barba, 2011: 17).

The Gulf Cooperation Council's most important normative substance is represented in the name of the integration – the “Khaleeji” (Gulf) identity (Legrenzi, 2011: 50). The distinctive attributes of such identity are the non-Shia (Sunni and Ibadi) affiliation of their regimes as well as their monarchic domestic structure. The fact that these normative elements are as important as geopolitical closeness is visible in the fact that the inclusion of Jordan and Morocco into the GCC has repeatedly been on the agenda (Beck, 2015: 201-2), while that of Yemen or Iraq has not been seriously considered. Such identity protection can be beneficial for small states of the GCC, maybe even more than for larger members.

History shows (Legrenzi, 2011: 87-111) that member states have used the GCC for legitimizing their self-interest through projecting it as a multilateral effort. Examples include the Kuwaiti war, the Abu Musa and Tunb islands dispute between Iran and the UAE, the oppression of Bahrain opposition in 2011. Such endeavors are conducted through “shaikly exchange” (Nonneman, 2005: 339), namely multilateral negotiations between the rulers resulting in the common representation of a specific issues.

While this strategy is highly beneficial for small Gulf states in theory, its usability has severe political limitations. In the last decade or so, we can witness the phenomenon of newly emerging nationalism which is observable in the top-down approach of Gulf governments to strengthen national identity (Patrick, 2012). Besides domestic measures (Cooke, 2014), this policy has an external dimension in a form of nation branding activities in order to promote national political and economic potential (Chong, 2010). This policy is especially important for small states, which have to fight international neglect caused attributable to their smallness.

One of the main aims of the small Gulf states in this regard is to differentiate themselves from each other (Zeineddine and Nicolescu, 2018). They want to attract foreign capital and to deepen economic ties, an endeavour closely connected to diversification. The competitiveness of each small Gulf states is pretty much dependent on the successful projection of their identity, which results in “in the race for establishing a globally recognized national brand” (Bohl, 2017).

In this environment of normative competition, the projection of a common, Khaleeji identity can be useless or even counter-productive, which is why the GCC as a normative tool is losing its value. Interestingly enough, this dimension does not create a cleavage between larger and smaller states but rather between the smaller ones as differentiation is a bigger issue for them.

### **Conclusion – Lessons for the Gulf Rift**

The main conclusion of the investigation is that the GCC is a mixed bag for its small members. Analyzing the integration from all three viewpoints helped us identify

advantageous and disadvantageous attributes (see Table 3). One can argue that due to the growing gap between threat perceptions, diversification attempts and nation branding policies, the negative aspects of the Council started to outgrow the positive ones, diminishing the effectiveness and the political value of the GCC.

**Table 3:** The evaluation of the GCC from the perspective of small states

Dimension	Advantages	Disadvantages
	Broad and imprecise wording of the founding document	
Security alliance	Forum for exchanging threat perception	Cannot function if threat perceptions differ
	Balancing Iran and Iraq	Over-dominance of Saudi Arabia
		Cannot provide neither security, nor autonomy, nor influence
Functional integration	Inter-governmental structure	Integration dilemma especially in terms of further deepening
	Functional cooperation in industrial development	Competition arising from diversification
	Rise of transnational civic identity	
Normative tool	Protection of Khaleeji identity	Counter-productive in terms of policy of differentiation
	Normative projection and international legitimization	

Source: Szalai, M. (2019)

All in all, the GCC has two structural problems – on the one hand, there is an inherent paradox of exposing small member states to Saudi dominance without the security benefits, and on the other, the Council is unable to manage the rising competition between its small members. Neither challenges can be attributed to the GCC itself but rather to external or systemic developments, which suggests that the efficiency of the Council is dependent on processes which it cannot control.

The current Gulf rift reflects both problems. The cause of the crisis was the growing gap between the security policy of Qatar and its neighbors, which was considered to be intolerable by Saudi Arabia and its partners. Moreover, the conflict is not just between Riyadh and Doha – the competition between the UAE and Qatar (and, to some extent, between Bahrain and Qatar) bears similar weight.

When it comes to the integration itself, there are two possible scenarios – stagnation and reversing the cooperation. Small states are not interested in the second option as they benefit from many aspects of functional and normative cooperation. From the perspective of larger states, one can argue that if dynamics would not change, more competition can be expected between the UAE and Saudi Arabia. If such a rivalry intensifies, the support of small Gulf states would come handy for both states. From this perspective, growing tensions between larger and smaller GCC members is not beneficial for either states on the middle term.

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## Notes

Note 1. The author would like to thank Dávid Révai who helped him in the research as an intern in the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Note 2. Measured in land area, number of inhabitants, GDP and the combination of the size of armed forces and absolute size of the military budget.

Note 3. That is the region of fifteen states (geographically located in the quadrilateral territory designated by Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Yemen) and Palestine.

Note 4. Territory is calculated based on the square kilometer of land area; population is the number of inhabitants; economic output is measured by GDP using current USD; the military budget is the official sum in USD; the size of the armed forces refers to the number of active duty military personnel, including paramilitary forces.

Note 5. A clear example of this is the evolution of Qatari foreign policy, which dramatically changed after Hamad emir seized the throne in 1995.

Note 6. Out of the GCC, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait are members of both organizations, while Qatar is member of the latter one only.

## The Gulf Crisis: An Economic Perspective and the Role of Gulf Regional Hubs

*Moustafa Ali*

### Introduction

The Blockade Gulf Crisis represents an enigma not only to leaders and decision makers within and outside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region but to scholars and researchers within and outside the academia community as well. Why the Gulf crisis remains a conundrum is due to its multifaceted aspects. Whereas prime motives are political (POMEPS, 2017), the economic motives, however, are ones that cannot be overlooked.

Parallel to this, the rise of geostrategic regional ports in the Gulf, such as, Gwadar, is of high geo-economic significance to China, Pakistan and other countries in the GCC region, including Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Qatar. It is argued, within this paper, that Gwadar's rising has contributed to the shaping or creation of economic alliances and counter economic alliances: China and Pakistan, at one end, and India and Iran on the other end. Moreover, it is also likely within scenarios of intense relations among the competing economies that such economic alliances and their counter alliances witness expansion on the regional and international levels.

The paper also explores the impacts of Gwadar's rising on the GCC countries' major ports in general and on the glitzy Dubai Emirate's ports in particular. The paper, therefore, will discuss the facets of how Gwadar's port represents an economic privilege to some of the GCC countries, and a simultaneous threat to Dubai's economy. It is widely spread in the literature on Gwadar and similar ports such as Chahbahar that they will pose a fatal economic threat mainly to Dubai's economy, and that the end of the flourishing economic era of Dubai is looming (Khan,2013). However, although it is very likely that the rising of Gwadar's port may eventually pose a considerable threat to Dubai's economy over the long term, other scenarios, as discussed within this paper, suggest that such potential regional hub ports are likely to operate in a competitive or a complementary environment rather than a cutthroat one.

This paper, therefore, is organized in an introduction, four sections and a conclusion. The first section examines the economic perspective of the current Gulf Crisis. The second section presents Gwadar's geostrategic significance. The third section discusses how a regional hub port such as Gwadar is shaping economic and counter economic alliance in the

region as well as discusses how the GCC countries may respond to the rising of regional hubs. The fourth section discusses to what extent the development of gulf regional hub ports, such as Gwadar's port, represents a threat to Dubai's economy. The study concludes with findings and presents recommendation for decision makers in the Gulf.

### **The Economic Perspective behind the Gulf Crisis 2017**

It is noteworthy to mention that when discussing the economic motives behind the Gulf crisis, the intent is not to argue that such motives, solely, have triggered the Gulf crisis, ties' severing and consequently the quartet's blockade. Nor is it the case to state that such motives have been the main ones behind it, but rather the accumulation of economic concerns as political disputes pile up.

Therefore, it is important, at the outset, to understand that there is a historical motive that is likely to be placed as the first latent motive. This historical motivation may be explicit in how the UAE, in particular, views Qatar – as the would-be eighth emirate (Al-Baharnat, 2004). Qatar would have been the richest of United Arab Emirates (UAE) if the federation initiative had been a success. Having said that, it is plausible to argue that the relations between Qatar and the UAE if compared with their counterparts with Saudi Arabia are likely to be much more intense and complicated, especially if we bear in mind the special veneration Qatar use to have for KSA.

On a parallel sphere, the Qatari legitimate expectations towards launching a regional Renminbi clearing center, the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, “to offer RMB clearing and settlement, [...] increase financial connectivity between China, Southwest Asia and the MENA region and increase opportunity to expand trade and investment between China, Qatar and the region” (Qatar Central Bank, 2015), is believed to have aroused the resentment of the UAE at the regional level, let alone the concerns and fury of the United States at the international level. The UAE's resentment is conspicuously manifested in the Qatar-China Clearing Hub as a fierce competitor to Dubai's International Financial Center, the current sole center in the region, as well as in the expected outcomes of attracting global clients and businesses.

Furthermore, the concerns and anger of the United States regarding the establishment of a *Yuan Clearing Center* for trading with China in the heart of the Gulf, a major US “petrodollar” asset, are equivocally crucial factors in the United States of America’s (USA) granting KSA, and UAE “carte blanche” to impose a “Saudi-led”, yet a UAE-planned and triggered blockade on Qatar, a scenario where Bahrain followed the former and Egypt acted upon orders of the latter under the current Trump administration's sight, and a move where Washington “wanted to punish Qatar for seeking natural gas sales with China priced not in US dollars but in Renminbi” which “apparently alarmed Washington, as Qatar is the world’s

largest LNG exporter” (Engdahl, 2017). Therefore, It is argued that the United States made this ugly exploitation of the political disputes between the Gulf states, especially Qatar and KSA, to project its “soft power” on one of its allies but this time through “proxy ,[...] Riyadh, to discipline those not “behaving” according to Washington wishes” (Ibid).

At a regional level, to examine the behaviour of the UAE in tackling its regional challenges, particularly those with “financial threatening” nature, two instances are likely to contribute to the theory this article intends to formulate. The First instance is that although Dubai and Egypt, under presidency of Mohammed Mursi, have signed an agreement to develop a special economic zone in Suez, it is believed that Dubai could not overlook the fact that this project poses a potential threat and acts as sworn competitor to its glitzy ports (Scott, 2013). Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the UAE was part of the plan to oust Mursi from power to eliminate any potential development of the special economic zone in Suez (Watanabe, 2014). The second example is UAE's endless efforts to delay or eliminate the development of the regional port of Gwadar (Javed, 2016), due to its potential threat and geo-strategic significance. In both situations, the UAE seems to have projected its “soft power” through promoting opponents to the ruling party: the military in the Egyptian case, and the Baluch in the case of Gwadar (Dunne, 2006). It is quite lucid that UAE's previous patterns of behaviour, at the system level of analysis, towards similar plans of developing international financial centers in the MENA region go in harmony with the common Arabic proverb: “Bite my heart, but do not bite my bread” (Badri, 2018).

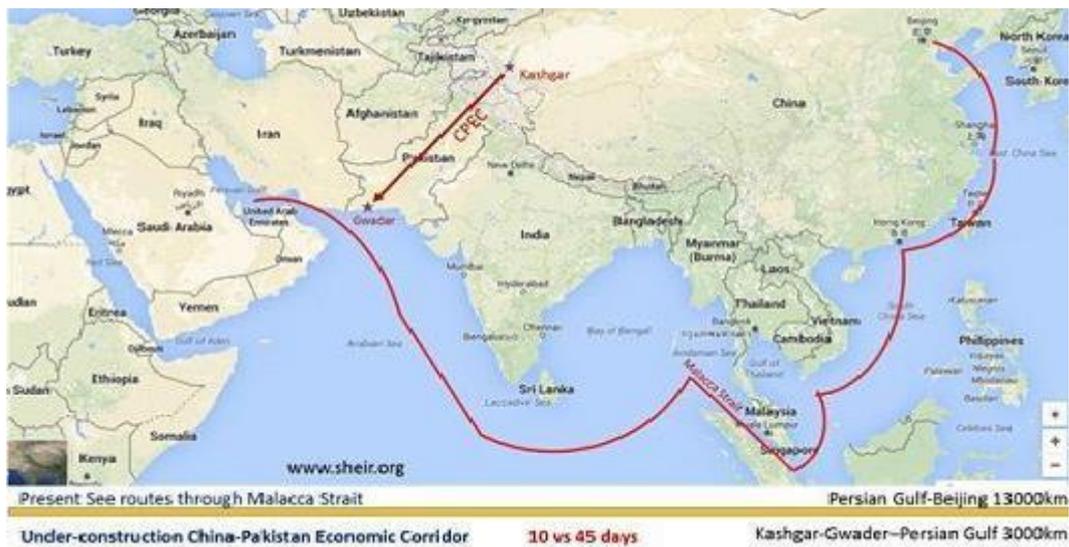
It is therefore plausible to argue that the interests of UAE, the US, and KSA have been seen in this move as an appropriate action to discipline and kneel down Qatar, which, to the fortunate of Qatar, has insofar doomed to be utter failure.

Therefore, this article posits that the motives behind the blockade are not of the same nature for all the parties involved in the conflict, whether in a direct or an indirect aspect. Whereas the motives of the UAE and USA are likely to be of economic nature in the first place and political origin in the second, they are more likely to be of political nature and regional competition rather than being of an economic nature to the KSA.

### **Gwadar’s Geostrategic Significance**

The geostrategic privileges of Gwadar as a regional hub port feature the natural characteristics of its location in the region of Baluchistan. The “southwestern province of Pakistan – about 43% of Pakistan's total area – which extends from the Gomal River in the northeast to the Arabian Sea in the south and from the borders of Iran and Afghanistan in the west and northwest to the Sulaiman Mountains and Kirthar hills in the east” (McColl, 2005).

Figure 1: The Geostrategic Location of Gwadar's Port



Source: Mushtaq, 2017

The figure above illustrates how the regional port of Gwadar substantially saves time, cost and effort if global economies opt to use it over other ports in the region. Located on the Arabian Sea, Gwadar's port enjoys unparalleled central geostrategic characteristics. The deep-sea port lies at "460 km west of Karachi, approximately 75 km east of Iran's border with Pakistan, and 400 km from the Strait of Hormuz" (Khan, 2013: 88). It serves as a regional and global hub that not only connects the Middle East with Central Asia, South Asia, and South China through land, and sea routes, but also represents a spot that can dominate the sea transshipment and transportation routes, where almost around 60% of global oil production passes by. The region of Baluchistan lies at the heart of the relentless hegemonic competition between today's global economic powers (i.e. the USA, China, and India) over protection of their sea trade routes in the Indian Ocean and Central Asia as well (Vali Nasr, 2013).

Not only is the Baluchistan region overly rich in natural resources such as oil, natural gas, gold, silver, iron, uranium, plutonium, coal, and copper, but also maritime resources which spread over 1609 km of its coastline (Khan, nd). The region, therefore, represents potential feasible lands for establishing industrial complexes, railroads, maritime routes and gas pipelines, thus connecting regions such as Central Asia, China, and Afghanistan with the Arabian Sea; and regions such as the Middle East and South Asia with Central Asia countries and China. Moreover, Gwadar, as part of the Silk Belt Road's overall developmental master plan, will not only provide landlocked countries with a multifaceted outlet to the global market, but will also grant global economies unique and abundant opportunities to effortlessly access the natural resources of Central Asia's non-hydrocarbon alternative

sources of energy, and easily access Asia's burgeoning markets in a mutual win-win situation (Hassan, 2005; Coulter, 2002).

Furthermore, the geostrategic location of Gwadar has military privileges China used to “construct a naval base as a hedge against its reliance on the USA for sea-line protection” (Blumenthal, 2005). Gwadar has a high capacity of hosting military bases for both China and Pakistan to provide them with an alternative safer port in case of scenarios or acts of war, thus providing China with an opportunity to detect USA's military major operations in the region (Dunne, 2006). China, conscious of such humongous geostrategic privileges, being more than a heavy user of routes of the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and The Cape of Good Hope, and being fully aware of the strong relationship between development and trade (Coulter, 2002: 133), has seized a once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to enter into a 40-year lease agreement with Pakistan in order to develop the economic infrastructure of Gwadar's port, thus preparing it to be a well-known world-class regional hub, provided that 91% of total realized revenues go to China (Hassan, 2017).

Although such terms are seemingly unfavoring Pakistan's interests, the development of Gwadar's commercial port is likely to transfer Pakistan's economy, enhance economic and industrial development in the Baluchistan region, and establish new key oil and trade routes to China, the Middle East and Africa, thus not only shortening the vast distances from 18,000 km to 3,000 km, around 85% of time and cost of goods transportation and logistics, but also creating more safer routes in comparison with current global sea routes. Another chief strategic factor to consider, as an outcome of the potential development of Gwadar's port, is that China's proximity to the Gulf region, and the Arabian Sea mouth will be unprecedented, along with a preferential access to the Indian Ocean. The Gwadar-Kashgar axis will boost communication between countries of the region and accelerate the pace of economic progress and development (Coulter, 2002), thus triggering the shaping of the Sino-Pakistani economic alliance.

### **Gwadar and the Shaping of Counter Economic Alliance**

The Sino-Pakistani accumulating agreements on the economic corridor, which insofar reached US\$62 billion, have triggered different rapid responses on different local, regional and international levels.

#### *Local Responses*

The local responses are primarily taking place in forms of sporadic insurgencies waged against the national government of Pakistan by the Baluch militant groups, which, along with the other Baluch nationalists, relate to the tribal system of Baluchistan, which is incessantly demanding the independence thereof (Zidan, 2011). It can therefore be argued that despite current efforts from the Pakistani government to reach encouraging

rapprochements with the Baluch rebel forces, it is probable that it will take a long time until the rebels are dissuaded from waging riots and insurgencies in the pursuit of independence of Baluchistan. There are increasing assertions from officials in the Pakistani government of Indian-Iranian's interventions to increase political instability in Baluchistan's region, thus postponing or preventing Gwadar's port from emerging as a rival sworn competitive regional hub port, specifically to Chahbahar and other regional ports in the GCC region (Bansal, 2006).

It is thus plausible to argue that that the military sporadic operations waged by the Baluch against Pakistan represent an integral component of the Baluch's enrooted identity in the region since they are the descendants of a blend of rebels gathered from different parts of the Arab region, who think they are of Arab origins. Understanding such a characteristic of the Baluch makes it far more palpable to comprehend why it is unlikely for them to stop fighting. It is in their genes that they are predestined not to be easily accommodated in any government or be subservient to the interest of the State of Pakistan, particularly when we recognize how it happened that they inhabited the Baluchistan region, a region that, at least historically, did not belong to a country (Zidan, 2011).

### *Regional Responses*

The regional responses of the agreements of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as part of the "One Road, One Belt" project, were translated into what can be coined as more serious "Counter Economic Alliance". Whereas China and Pakistan, after the 40-year lease of Gwadar, are evidently defined as economic allies, given the aggregate agreements of CPEC, an Indian-Iranian strategic alliance is in the making and expansion. The Iranian's Chahbahar port, a potential competitor to Gwadar yet not as equivalent in terms of depth and proximity, has enticed Pakistan's sworn enemy, India, to enter into agreements with Iran to develop the infrastructure of the Chahbahar in order to build a strategic economic and trade hub that contains an industrial complex; thus granting India an easy access to Afghanistan, and central Asian markets (Hosseini, 2016). It is, consequently, lucid to observe how the rising of Gwadar's geostrategic significance is shaping the regional economic alliances and their counterparts.

The intense competition between China and India triggered the latter's agreements with Iran- as recently relieved from economic sanctions- to develop the infrastructure of a Chahbahar, which is likely to not only boost India's alliance with Afghanistan and its neighboring locked countries, but also facilitate India's access to Central and south Asia. Moreover, it will increase and maintain India's imports of oil from Iran, and Central Asian countries through Afghanistan, thus balancing the increasing presence of China, its economic rival, in Central and south Asia through the CPEC and Gwadar (Ibid). It is of India's long-term interest to have Chahbahar port as an alternative route for its economic, trade

and geo-economics interests, mainly when this alternative route surrounds Pakistan, its rival sworn enemy.

For Iran, Chahbahar will exceptionally contribute to shaping such a strategic economic alliance with India, widen its geopolitical, economic, investment interests with Afghanistan, and grant Iran more influence in the region against Saudi Arabia, where Iran can project more power in the Arabian Gulf if it opts for using Chahbahar as a marine and operational military airbase, if the need may arise, and “in supporting the Houthis in Yemen as well” (Hughes, 2016).

It is thought, in a parallel context, that India's proximity through Chahbahar, to the Baluchistan region may play a decisive role in intensifying the nationalism spirit of the Baluch against Pakistan in their pursuit of independence, thus keeping the instability in the Baluchistan region to keep Pakistan busy with its internal security issues, and simultaneously encircle China's interests in the region, thus impeding its plan to turn Gwadar into transshipment hub (Chellaney, 2011). Nonetheless, a counter point of view which reiterates that India and Iran are the last expected foreign powers to seek fueling instability in the region of Baluchistan since any change in the Pakistani Baluchistan political environment, in terms of independence, would lure Iranian's Baluchistan to adopt a similar trajectory, thus posing inevitable threats and daunting challenges before the development of Chahbahar as a regional hub port (Bansal, 2006).

Although the mainstream literature and media in the mainland of both the Indian- Iranian economic alliance, and Sino-Pakistani alliance promote intensifying the rivalry atmosphere between the two seemingly opposing projects, Gwadar and Chahbahar ports, this should neither eliminate any other possible scenarios from the equation, nor other attempts that set in motion the rapprochement between the officials of governments of both alliances, even if such scenarios seem very unlikely, particularly when both alliances meet on their overall interests. Very unlikely as it might seem, “Islamabad has extended a welcome to Tehran to participate in the CPEC, which Tehran has consented to consider” (Nazar, 2015: Nawaz, 2016). By the same token, an offer by Tehran and India was made to China and Pakistan to join the Chahbahar accord, a scenario where everyone is better off, in other words, a win-win scenario. The proposed scenario entails joining both Gwadar and Chahbahar economic corridors in a way that they complement each other. This yielded more open-minded statements by government officials from both sides that a motorway may be built to connect the two ports, thus benefiting from making them complementary hub ports, and potentially guarantee a more secured route for both alliances.

In the pursuit of expanding their Indian-Iranian alliance as driven by economic interests, and realizing the importance thereof, India and Iran have been after countries such as Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and other landlocked countries in the region to join

their alliance, or in other words, to opt for Chahbahar routes in lieu of CPEC Gwadar's. Entering into agreement with Iran and India, Afghanistan is expecting to lessen its dependency on Pakistan for reaching the Arabian Sea, even if the Chahbahar-Indian route is farther than Gwadar's, which might delineate Afghanistan government's dire desire for projecting its free will in the formulation of its policies (Hughes, 2016). However, this further implies that in case Afghanistan falls under no pressures from the Pakistani side, they are very likely to welcome the Pakistani Gwadar route. In other words, instead of having one route, they will have two routes.

It is, therefore, clear that the economic war over geostrategic hub ports is very likely to trigger more expansion in members of both the Sino-Pakistan alliance, and its counter Indian – Iranian alliance, since it became more resonating that the more powerful an economy is, the more power it can project.

### *The GCC Responses*

Constituting a substantial portion of the region, the GCC countries' reactions, first towards the rising of Gwadar's port and secondly towards the shaping of geo-economic alliances, are not easy to predict, in terms of whether the six Gulf States will have a collective decision, such as opting to join the Sino-Pakistani alliance on grounds of regional security preferences, or that they, in light of the current Gulf crisis (Note 1), will divide amongst themselves to add more momentum to the widely spread “cynical refrain often heard on the Arab streets”: “The Arabs have agreed not to agree” (Saleh, 2005).

What seems to be the major trend throughout the GCC countries are the sole decisions made by each GCC State in this regard. For instance, information is abundant about Qatari's plans to cooperate with Pakistan in areas of maritime cooperation where “Gwadar's port can serve as transshipment centers for Hamad port” (Bukhari, 2017). While pieces of unconfirmed and officially unannounced information on some websites reveal other Qatari's plans to invest around 15% of the total CPEC cost in its infrastructure projects (al-Shammari, 2017), the competent authorities in Qatar announced no denials insofar in this regard. Furthermore, official announcements have been already made on Doha's hosting to the Qatari-Pakistani business and investment conference in March 2018 (Al-Raya, 2017). According to the expected outcomes of this conference, “different investment and business opportunities between the Qatari and Pakistani sides will be discussed” (News Desk, 2017). For Saudi Arabia, Gwadar's port, it is argued, represents a gateway through which “Saudi's oil exports can be extended to China according to Saudi's request from Islamabad in 2006” (Khan, 2013). It is, however, very possible that Saudi Arabia joins the CPEC to strengthen its trade and investments with Pakistan and China, thus creating more promising opportunities for the Saudi's economic activities. It is unequivocal that local industries in Saudi Arabia,

such as date industries, and religious ritual products are very likely to flourish and access the Central Asian markets through Gwadar.

The solid and robust relationship Pakistan has with the GCC countries, particularly Qatar, KSA, UAE and Kuwait give great incentives to GCC economies to join the CPEC's packages of investments. For instance, though unconfirmed, unannounced, or denied from the Kuwaiti government side or its competent authority, there is news about Kuwaiti government investing in an oil refinery in Gwadar (Dawn, 2007; Bhutta, 2016). Without the need to confirm or deny these news, what can be implicitly realized here is two-fold: 1) the expectations of the Pakistani government, and the Pakistani public opinion of an overall support from the GCC States in Gwadar and CPEC projects, 2) the dire desire of the Pakistani government to attract investments from GCC countries for this project *per se*.

### *International Responses*

On the international level, however, it seems that the aforementioned alliances are part of a bigger Economic War between the major economic powers of the century: USA, China, and India over control and security of energy sources in the era post the Arab Oil. It is historically proven that the relations between China and Pakistan has stood the test of time, since" in 2010, when a US delegate confronted a Chinese diplomat about Beijing's uncompromising support for Pakistan, the Chinese reportedly responded: "Pakistan is our Israel" (Deen, 2010; Noonari, 2014). The USA, despite being an ally to Pakistan, does seem to turn a blind eye or tend to overlook the Sino-Pakistani increasing ties over the past decades. The USA, I tend to argue, is very likely to be on the side of Indian-Iranian alliance, even if this is not officially announced, due to its concerns over China's incessant growing economic interests in Africa, the Middle East and in Central Asia.

### **An Economic Privilege or a Geostrategic Threat?**

The mutual accusations between India and Pakistan regarding intervention of both countries in waging insurgencies in Kashmir and Baluchistan respectively, are likely to create considerable uncertainties between the two sides, thus templating the development of Chahbahar and Gwadar ports in contexts of geostrategic threats. It is the context, then, at which these actions are interpreted, that assist in judging whether the rising of a regional hub port may or may not represent an economic privilege or pose a geostrategic threat.

The economic privileges expected from the CPEC anchored at Gwadar, for China and Pakistan, are unequivocal, if security is guaranteed. Similarly, Chahbahar stands as an unparalleled feasible economic opportunity for India, Iran and Afghanistan. With all factors constant, rivalry or complementarities between the two projects may depend on the perspectives of decision makers from both sides. Military leaders, for example, may see the

projects as hegemonic behaviour, stealth aggression, projection of power, or whatever terminology that brings about related military notions and actions (Chellaney, 2011).

With regard to whether the rising of Gwadar pose a threat to Dubai's economy, it is important to reiterate that regional hub ports, particularly ports with unique characteristics such as Gwadar, Chahbahar, Jibel Ali, and Rashid ports constitute economic privileges in contexts where fair ground of economic competition is promoted, and where no intervention, whether directly or by proxy, is made to undermine a port for the interest of another.

The rising of Gwadar amongst the GCC's ports, particularly Dubai's two regional ports, is very likely to pose a threat to the economy of UAE, and Bahrain, compete with the economy of Oman, and work in complementarity with economies of Qatar, KSA, and Kuwait. Maritime transportation and transshipment are of tremendous global importance to the GCC countries, since sea transportation accounts for around 90% of total world trade (IMO, 2010).

The geostrategic location, proximity to Central Asia markets, and its distance from the choke points are amongst the major factors that distinguish Gwadar port from all other ports in the region, including the key ports of the GCC's countries (Note 2). Now, if China and Pakistan are willing to “make investments in Gwadar on the pattern of the UAE that is on the basis of 51 per cent local and 49 per cent foreign partnership” (Jabeen, nd), or willing to make Gwadar an exact replica of Dubai's ports in terms of advanced and highly sophisticated ports, development of glitzy tourism sector, what are the consequences for Dubai's economy? Will it decline or perish?

The reason why the focus in the aforementioned question is on Dubai's economy is an apparent one. Dubai has no oil left to export to bring in revenues that assist its government in handling its expenditure and spending. Dubai's excelling in the diversification of its economy has paid off, no doubt. Therefore, in case of the burgeoning competition of not only Gwadar, Chahbahar, and Hamad port, but also the potentially rising Salalah port, it is presumed that Dubai's share in the global sea logistic sector will plummet. However, a valid question to pose in this regard is: When is this likely to occur?

It is noticeable that it is a matter of decades till Gwadar port witnesses an advancement equivalent to that of Dubai's in terms of financial free zone services, and lavish constructions attracting renowned global corporations, and renowned global educational institutions. “Dubai in particular has provided a row of 'firsts' or 'news' in architecture and construction, like Burj Al Arab, Burj Khalifa, The Palm Islands, the Gate, the Index, The Dubai Mall and so on” (Hvidt, 2014), amongst many more facets of advancement on all levels that make the Arabs name it the Planet of Dubai, the Las Vegas of the Gulf. One more advantageous factor for Dubai's ports is the infamous Arabian culture and environment.

What will take place from an economic perspective, I tend to argue, is more supply of regional hub ports against decreasing demands of vessels desiring to use these many ports, which will reduce the cost of sea transportation, thus making factors such as competitions, economic and marketing packages, client preferences, and most importantly the security factor have a final say in decision making when it comes to investments. All of these will contribute to more or less revenues. Nonetheless, if Pakistan manages to overcome the sporadic incidents and insurgencies, and succeeds in transforming Gwadar's port to replicate Dubai, which is very unlikely to happen in less than two decades, at most, it is only then that Gwadar will have an absolute advantage over any other port in the region in terms of time, effort and cost.

Furthermore, in light of the "Arab Exceptionalism" (Note 3), the GCC countries may, if the current gulf crisis ends, opt, through the GCC, to initiate a series of substantial decisions to provide special economic, oil and gas packages to clients who are willing to prefer GCC ports over Gwadar, thus opening the door for a set of options that give a comparative advantage to the GCC ports. GCC countries can also consider work in complementarity with Gwadar and Chahbahar, thus designing scenarios where every country is better off. GCC countries may also make use of Gwadar's port through a considerable amount of investments that generate revenues, and maximize its profits. Gwadar, in itself, I tend to argue, should not be seen as potential threat, but rather a gate of raw materials, and natural resources that will come at unprecedented lower prices, thus enabling the GCC states to commence a series of industrial projects in their pursuit of diversifying their renter economies. Finally, it is recommended that researchers may explore whether the rising of such regional hubs is likely or unlikely to trigger an independent GCC economic alliance.

## **Conclusion**

The economic motives behind the Gulf crisis as proposed in this article focus on how the Qatari expectations of launching a Renminbi Clearing Center for trade with China were seen by US and UAE as threats to the former's petrodollar policies and to the latter's international financial center. Parallel to this, the geostrategic significance of Gwadar plays a substantial role in the competition between major global economic actors over developing geostrategic ports to maximize their interests and protect sea-line trade routes. The rising of Gwadar has triggered creation of economic regionalism and emergence of geo-economic alliances and international level. The Baluchistan question, whether in Pakistan or Iran, represents a critical factor for the success of developmental plans for both ports, Gwadar and Chahbahar. The Sino-Pak economic alliance, with ambitious economic plans in Gwadar and the CPEC, is likely to witness expansion with new potential GCC members. In addition, the Indian-Iranian alliance is expanding its members in the region to develop Chahbahar. The responses of the GCC countries are late as always. However, the two regional ports can be of great value if GCC countries made the right decisions, or otherwise, both Gwadar and

Chahbahar will outperform ports of the GCC countries over the long term. The question whether Gwadar represents economic privileges or pose economic threats to Dubai's economy depends on how Dubai and the GCC countries will act, thus necessitating that the GCC States settle their disputes and constitute a bloc that may have a weight in its own right in economic negotiations and bargains.

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## Notes

Note 1. The economic blockade imposed on Qatar by KSA, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain on June 2017.

Note 2. KSA's King Abdullah port, Bahrain's Salman port and the New port, Dubai's twin ports Jibel Ali, and Rashid, Abu- Dhabi's Khalifa port, Oman's seven ports network, Kuwait's ports al-Shuwaikh, al-Shauiba, and Dawha, and Qatar's Hamad port.

Note 3. The characteristics of the Arab decision makers' nature of making unpredictable decisions at unexpected times.

## Oman: Institutional Genealogy of an Exceptional Foreign Policy

*Noha Ezzat*

The Gulf region has been of interest to Middle East scholars since its transformation in the 1970s due to the political withdrawal of British power and the economic boom initiated by rising oil prices. The shift to American predominance added to the increasing economic clout of Gulf states has put them at the crossroads of conflict between regional and global powers. As soon as Iranians installed an Islamic republic in 1979 hostile to American power, intense military conflicts came closer to the Gulf with the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, followed by two wars with Iraq in 1990-91 and 2003. Turbulence was back after 2011 with Arab uprisings unleashing civil wars in Syria and Yemen, added to decreasing oil prices and increasing anxieties towards the calls for change and democratization.

One country was often overlooked in the analyses of the Gulf: The Sultanate of Oman. Given its location on the Indian Ocean with isolation from the Persian Gulf proper and the humble quantities of oil it possesses, Oman never fit the exact profile of a “Gulf country” despite its membership in the Gulf cooperation council (GCC). This exceptionalism has characterized its foreign policy as well which often departed from typical GCC orientations, and recently started attracting attention given its key role in mediating between the US and Iran (Aboudi, 2013) despite the intense rivalry between most GCC states and Iran. Nevertheless, this was not the first time Omanis maintained an independent stand in the gulf.

This paper aims to explain why Oman developed this independent foreign policy as a GCC member, arguing that it cannot be explained through cultural factors like its *Ibadhi* belief system as some analysts like to point. It is rather understood through structural factors that take into consideration the recent history of the sultanate as an institution that rose in tandem with British supremacy in the Indian Ocean, before facing the challenges brought by the post-colonial Arab regional system with which it has a weak structural tie.

Transformations after oil production began brought the sultanate a step closer to its Gulf neighbors, yet without erasing the earlier foundations of the sultanate’s perception of its role and insecurities in the region. The paper will survey Oman’s exceptional foreign policy under Qaboos before scrutinizing culturalist interpretations of it, and finally offering a historical institutionalist explanation.

## Omani Exceptionalism

In March 2018, Syria's foreign minister Walid Muallem arrived in Muscat for talks with his Omani counterpart (Stratfor, 2018). It was his second official visit in less than three years to the only capital in the GCC that maintained relations with the Assad regime in Syria, refused to take sides in the ongoing civil war, and continued to receive officials from Damascus; a position that was applauded by Assad himself in an interview last December (Middle East Monitor, 2018). As a core conflict in the region involving heavy support from the GCC to Syria's rebels, Oman's neutral position is an anomaly in the Gulf, yet it wasn't the only one. Oman had refused earlier to join the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen as conflict spiraled in the latter in 2015, and even seems to have pursued policies favorable to a legitimate role for the Houthi rebels battling the Saudi coalition as fears increase in Muscat of excessive Saudi influence as well as the instability caused by its military intervention in the Mahra province that borders Oman (Al-Falahi, 2016).

This Houthi connection has enabled Oman to play a crucial diplomatic role, for instance, it mediated the release of Indonesian and Malaysian citizens held captive by the Houthis last March, in addition to hosting a meeting between British foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt and chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam, and helping evacuate the US embassy in Sanaa after the Houthi takeover in 2015 (Middle East Monitor, 2019; Ramani, 2019). As conflicts intensified across the Middle East in the past decade, Oman has gained importance, not in supporting certain factions as its GCC neighbors mostly do, but in keeping its communications open with a wide range of state and non-state actors and utilizing them to mediate and ease regional tensions. Its mediation has ranged from releasing captives to brokering the deal between Iran and Western powers, yet it is a policy that has been ongoing for decades despite receiving attention only recently, and has many times distanced it from other GCC members.

Oman's independent policy was first noted in 1979, when it refused to sever ties with Egypt after the latter signed the Camp David accords with Israel despite opposition from Arab states. It continued with neutrality during the Iran-Iraq war and an engagement with Iran's regime despite a hostile reception of Iran's 1979 revolution in other Gulf states – withstanding brief tensions with Iran between 1982-1984. Later came an overt diplomatic reception of Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Yitzhak Rabin by Qaboos; a still unprecedented move in the Gulf that happened yet again in Muscat a few months ago with an official visit by Israeli PM Netanyahu (Kechichian, 1995: 89, 102-5; 253-4). Oman's independence in the GCC was further cemented by its friendly approach to Qatar as a Saudi-led blockade continues since 2017 aimed at pressuring the tiny emirate to cut-off its support for Islamists across the Middle East (Sherwood, 2017: 13).

This independence from official GCC policies in general, and Saudi Arabia's policies in particular, is not restricted to the Middle East, but extends as well to neighboring South Asia. Long associated with India under British rule, Oman enjoys closer relations to Delhi compared to other GCC members, added to a rather neutral approach towards Pakistan, in contrast to the warm relations that characterize the latter with Saudi Arabia and several GCC members. Given the strategic relations that bound Pakistan and Saudi Arabia under American tutelage during the cold war while India enjoyed close relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Oman's typical association with Western powers did not stop it from maintaining its decades-old intertwinement with India's military and diplomatic institutions.

Just after its independence, and under India's closest leader to the USSR Indira Gandhi, Oman signed a military protocol with the Indian Navy in 1972 whereby Navy personnel would be deployed for three years on Oman's shores. Later came memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on military cooperation in 1985, along with biennial naval exercises that began in 1993 and continue to this day (Gupta, 2014). From its side, India's third worldist policies that favored anti-colonial struggles was sidelined when it came to Oman, as it was one of the countries to keep its diplomats in Oman during the violent rebellion that shook the province of Dhofar (Al-Jaber and Cafiero, 2018). Along the years the strategic partnership was entrenched by a wide range of treaties, naval drills, counter-terrorism cooperation, and Indian investments, added to a large number of skilled Indian expatriates unlike many of their counterparts in Saudi Arabia for instance mostly confined to unskilled jobs – a legacy of strong commercial ties that predates the more recent oil boom (Parween, 2013).

In contrast, Oman's relations with Pakistan have been characterized by neutral engagement at best, declining in recent years despite a high degree of military cooperation in the 1980s. The latter was probably driven by a mutual concern towards the soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Oman's short tensions with Islamic Iran which left it insecure for a while and pushed it as well to sign a military access agreement with the US in 1980, again facing harsh criticism from GCC countries at the time – the first such treaty with a great power aside from the British (Al-Khalili, 2009: 86). For instance, Oman has chosen to abstain from voting against India on the Kashmir issue at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in November 1994 and granted the Indians the rights to carry out a coastal survey of its coast while ignoring a similar offer from Pakistan (Anwar and Baig, 2013: 99-100).

In light of these divergences from the GCC despite Oman's membership in it, the question becomes why has Oman developed this exceptional foreign policy in the Gulf despite its small size and continued need to rely on greater powers to protect it – a characteristic that is shared with Bahrain and Kuwait as well – and why does it effectively position itself at a distance from Saudi Arabia rather than achieve the benefits of bandwagoning with the

GCC's heaviest power. Explaining rather than merely describing Oman's foreign policy is rare in the literature. Moreover, Oman's *Ibadhi* Muslim culture have imbued it with a degree of uniqueness that fueled culturalist interpretations of its state and politics and sidelined efforts at structurally understanding them within the wider context of institutional transformations in the region during the past century.

### **Culturalist Interpretations**

References to the role of Oman's culture in its diplomacy and foreign policy abound in the limited literature dedicated to studying it, which often emphasize the role of the *Ibadhi* sect of Islam in contrast to the Sunni and Shi'a sects that dominate the rest of the Middle East and colour many of its conflicts today. Culturalist accounts point as well to Oman's commercial power across the Indian Ocean and how it spanned diverse dominions ranging from East Africa to the shores of Persia and India giving rise to a culture of tolerance and diversity amongst Omani merchants and diplomats; a culture to which is attributed Oman's unique approach to foreign policy and its unbroken record of mediating between different adversaries since 1970. However, there are several problematic assumptions in those culturalist accounts that shall be scrutinized below.

Famous amongst culturalist works is Jones and Ridout's book on the relation between culture and diplomacy in Oman, where they point to a consensus and tolerance-driven policy rooted in the country's cosmopolitan history and driving its "good neighbor" diplomacy (Jones and Ridout, 2012: 41-2). Firstly, this account mostly overlooks the 38-year reign of Sultan Said bin Taimur who preceded Qaboos and ruled the country during the Middle East's turbulent decolonization; a period through which Oman was embroiled in a conflict with Saudi Arabia and the Arab world at large, witnessed the beginning of a long rebellion in Dhofar and abstained from any diplomatic engagement with the world. Ignoring the reign of Said is common in surveys of Oman's foreign policy as in Kechichian's known book for instance which dedicates a few pages to Said before delving into the policies of "Modern Oman" – presumably beginning with Qaboos's takeover in 1970 (Kechichian, 1995). This is a questionable reading that imagines a continuity between Oman's commercial power in the nineteenth century and its calm and meditative role in the region under Qaboos, skipping what this paper argues is a foundational moment in the structure of Oman's relations with the Arab world and the global system.

Secondly, Jones and Ridout point to Oman's abstaining from ideological or sectarian conflicts which they claim rises in part from its unique *Ibadhi* heritage; a problematic claim as we shall see given the tense relation between the sultanate in Muscat and Oman's long *Ibadhi* tradition arising from its interior (Jones and Ridout, 2012: 3). They point as well to a "culture of politeness" in Oman which, added to its vagueness, seems to be an anthropological impression of Omani behaviour that may easily extend to some of its tribal

conservative neighbors in the Gulf and could reflect the still-humble effects of modernization on a tribal society more than a unique Omani trait *per se*. A reference to the “Falaj system” of irrigation that instilled a culture of consensus according to the authors can be criticized too given the Persian origins of the system and the absence of a similar impact on Iran’s foreign policy (Ibid: 55).

The link between *Ibadhism* and Omani mediation is present in another account by Leonard who points to an “Ibadi-based method of mediation” that is utilized between tribes for resolving disputes, yet he automatically assumes its impact on diplomacy without noticing that Oman’s tribalism was often at bay from the sultanate’s coastal regime (Leonard, 2017). Oman’s contemporary policies are actually keen on distancing the state from an exclusively *Ibadhi* definition of identity as attested to by the more “generic form of Islam” disseminated in school curricula and emphasized in national discourse (Valeri, 2009: 28). Moreover, population estimates actually differ on whether *Ibadhis* constitute such a decisive majority, as some accounts point to a slight Sunni majority while others cite a nearly 50-50 distribution (Ibid: 127).

Consequently, Oman’s neutrality towards Iran as a Shi’i power according to this culturalist understanding is due to the lack of threat perceptions towards Tehran among its policymakers who represent its *Ibadhi* creed, and as such are at bay from sharing the anxiety of Sunni states towards the Iranian regime’s Shi’i zeal. Moreover, its keenness on mediation and engaging its neighbourhood constructively reflects its centuries-old cosmopolitan and non-sectarian identity. Symptomatic of culturalism, these understandings of Oman stem from observing the behaviour of actors representing the thin flesh of the state rather than a thorough historical dissection exposing its backbone as an institution.

The structural factors that make identities politically relevant in the first place is a dilemma never addressed by culturalists who assume their automatic constitution of politics as Lecours points out (Lecours, 2000: 500). A further concern is whether utilizing a cultural characteristic is an institutional tactic that endows a policy with symbolism but does not constitute its actual structural cause. Claiming that a state possesses a unique culture is many times an official discourse aiming at distancing it from universal norms. Finally, it completely undermines the concept of power in shaping politics, thus reducing institutions from active players in power contests to passive expressions of local cultures (Ibid: 514). Historical institutionalism, on the other hand, holds the promise of explaining Oman’s independent foreign policy by delving into the history of the sultanate’s creation and transformation as power shifts shaped the region.

## A Historical Institutional Genealogy

Historical Institutionalism (HI) is a tradition in social sciences that studies the development of institutions across time to explain real world outcomes “using history as an analytical tool” (Steinmo, 2008). Institutions in HI are not necessarily modern state institutions as such, but any set of “formal rules, compliance procedures, [and] standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals” in a certain setting (Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth, 1992: 2). Part and parcel of HI as a paradigm is rejecting the notion that history is a chain of independent events that can be isolated in terms of their effects on institutions. HI is rather interested in how sequences of events cement a specific institutional path (e.g. a policy) and how a far a critical juncture can alter these paths or create new ones altogether (Steinmo, 2008: 128).

For almost one thousand years stretching from Islam’s emergence to the rise of European power in the seventeenth century, Oman was dominated by the rudimentary but egalitarian system of the imamate based on *Ibadhi* creed; a reflection of its tribes’ lack of economic differentiation that granted none of them hierarchical dominance (Speece, 1989: 507). Nevertheless, this applies only to Oman proper which developed in the interior around the Hajar mountains. To its south was the coastal regions of modern Oman which often fell under the dominance of nearby maritime powers like Abbasids and Persians. By the sixteenth century Muscat was constantly mired in the conflict between Ottoman and Portuguese power until 1649, when the dynasty of the Ya’aribah representing the imamate regime at the time defeated the Portuguese. Capturing ships and consolidating their rule on the coast, the Ya’aribah soon possessed the largest fleet in the northern Indian ocean, and power started shifting to the coast, never to move back to the interior as the commercial coming of the Europeans was soon to prove a lasting economic shift (Townsend, 1977: 29-35).

A succession struggle and a Persian invasion put an early end to the Ya’ariba’s power and transferred it to Ahmed Albusaid who liberated the coast again in 1743 and established the ruling line of Albusaidis that continues to this day. Under their power, Oman became a trading empire with dominions across the Indian ocean, while the interior sank into negligence as the capital moved to Muscat and a hereditary sultanate was established. Yet, the imamate system continued to dominate the now-autonomous but irrelevant interior while Muscat was preoccupied with the wealth and power of the high seas and the sultanate became officially known as “Muscat and Oman” (Kechichian, 1995: 29-30). Soon the sultan would recognize the rising power of Britain as he signed a treaty with its East India Company in 1798, before succumbing to its takeover and detachment of his Persian Gulf coasts – today’s UAE – as well as its decision to permanently divide his maritime empire which left the sultanate dependent on British payments from 1871 till 1956 (Townsend, 1977: 41-3).

As its power subsided and it became effectively a British client state, the sultanate in Muscat had to grapple with an autonomous *Ibadhi* interior that rejected the sultan and his patrons; a geopolitical fracture within the sultanate whose impact endured in the form of an Anglophile foreign policy in Muscat. The British came to the aid of the sultan time and again to quell *Ibadhi* rebellions, yet the irrelevance of the interior to their commercial interests pushed them to broker the Treaty of al-Sib in 1920 between Muscat and Oman, effectively granting autonomy for the imamate while recognizing the sultanate officially as a representative of Muscat and Oman (Sherwood, 2017: 12). Thus, Oman entered the twentieth century with a fragile dual political system that only the British kept intact from their power base in India; a fragility that pushed its new sultan Said bin Taimur in 1932 to embrace his patrons and shun relations with the world.

### *Anglophilia and Arabophobia*

During Said's long reign Oman had no diplomatic ties with any country aside from Britain and India (Kechichian, 1995: 47). Muscat had already been incorporated into the hierarchy of Indian native princes supported by London, with Said's father attending the commemoration for coronating King Edward VII in Delhi, and Said himself receiving education at the Mayo College for Indian princes while his Arabic language remained weak until he returned to Muscat (Asian and African Studies Blog, 2014, Al-Jbarat, 2012: 79). After the end of WWII and the beginning of British withdrawal from the Middle East, Said's rule was naturally in crisis. Firstly, the emerging oil-based power of Saudi Arabia initiated a conflict over the Buraimi Oasis in Oman's north – thought to contain oil reserves – by trying to lure the alienated tribes; a dispute that was strongly tied to a resurgent imamate challenge aiming to create a state for Oman in the interior independent from Muscat. Secondly, the emerging wave of Arab nationalism and the dynamics of the cold war unleashed a rebellion in Oman's western province of Dhofar bordering Yemen, eventually supported by the USSR and communist China (Al-Khalili, 2009: 57).

The tense birth of an Arab regional system during the 1940s and 1950s left Muscat alone, increasingly weakened, and desperate for the Anglo-Indian regional system it was long acquainted with. Conservative monarchies led by Saudi Arabia and radical republics led by Nasser's Egypt were both hostile to Muscat's colonial ties and sympathetic to the *Ibadhi* tribes' rebellion; the former due to English support for Muscat in Buraimi, and the latter for its sympathy with anti-colonial struggles and the association between Arab nationalism and the Imamate rebellion back then (Ibid, 22). Despite the Nasser-Saud rivalry, the Arab League (AL) was bent on isolating Muscat and granting legitimacy to the Omani Imamate. Muscat's efforts to join Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in the 1940s and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1962 were both foiled by Arab opposition. An "Omani Question" was raised as well at the United Nations (UN) in 1957 by representatives of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen

calling on the UNSC to consider the “armed aggression of the UK against the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the imamate of Oman” (Ibid: 39).

At the end, British ties paid off as Britain deployed forces for one last time to quell the imamate in 1959, utilizing its troops in Trucial Oman (UAE) and Aden, along with the Royal Air Force; a battle that entrenched Muscat’s Anglophile orientation and its extensive military ties with Britain (Louis, 2004: 48). The Dhofar rebellion which came in the late 1960s and with a direct connection with the cold war cornered Said whose isolationism was seen as outdated by the British themselves. His son Qaboos took over in 1970 while Oman’s moderate oil discoveries started providing sustenance to Muscat along with Britain granting the country its official independence. Qaboos renamed the country “the sultanate of Oman” dropping Muscat in his bid to seal the end of the centrifugal cause of the *Ibadhi* Imamate.

Qaboos soon embarked on opening Oman to the world diplomatically by seeking memberships in the UN, AL and several organizations; a clear sign that Oman was done with its anxieties towards the Arab regional system and was willing to engage it. A cool embrace of “Arab identity” was seen as well in the narrative of the state. Yet, the weak structural ties between Oman and the rest of the Arab world, coupled with an enduring geo-political perception of its direct neighbourhood, was to show time and again in its conduct of foreign policy. As he ascended the throne and embraced the Arabs, Qaboos’s sultanate made its first geo-political calculation by seeking Pahlavi Iran’s support to quell Dhofar’s rebellion. Just after the Iranians seized three islands in the Persian Gulf claimed by the UAE, raising fears of Iranian expansionism at the expense of the fragile Arab states of the Gulf, Qaboos went his way sealing a border agreement with the Shah in the strait of Hormuz and inviting thousands of his Imperial army to fight Oman’s war in Dhofar (Kechichian, 1995: 100).

Nevertheless, with oil production beginning in the late 1960s, the impact of cash inflows was gradually felt, and Oman’s state was on its way to be transformed into a rentier state; a structural transformation that brought it a step closer to its Gulf neighbors and enabled Muscat to reduce its reliance on Britain while allowing it to warm up to the US (Owatram, 2004: 26-7). With Arab nationalism subsiding and the economic weight of the Gulf increasingly felt, Muscat joined the GCC in 1980, in line with its conservative pro-status quo approach that was now aligning its neighbors together against Iran’s radical revolution. Muscat, however, insisted on avoiding a definition of the GCC as an anti-Iran alliance, in line with its centuries-old geo-political perception of Iran (Sherwood, 2017: 13).

Oman’s association with the Gulf can thus be understood only as a reflection of rentierism as a structural similarity with its neighbors, creating a shared socio-economic fragility and an inclination to secure the Western status quo. Consequently, it views the GCC as a regional collaborative project not as a strategic bloc with a joint definition of friend and enemy, which explains its refusal of a GCC union plan recently, as well as its desire for mediating

with Iran while going its own way in South Asia. Similarly, the openness towards Israel reflects a lack of “Arab sensibilities” that shaped GCC foreign policy towards Israel for decades much like its erstwhile partnership with Iran’s Shah. The Israeli state, which presented a strategic challenge to the Arab regional system as much as it shaped a cultural enmity with Arabs and most Muslims, only went to war with its strategic foes. As such, given its weak structural ties to the Arab regional system, it is natural that Oman is largely absent from pursuing any “Arabist” policy towards Israel as a state, and any state for that matter – despite having an Arabic-speaking Muslim population.

## Conclusion

Oman’s sultanate is the fruit of its entanglement with the world economy synonymous with the rise of British power in the Indian Ocean. What could be termed a “commercial-diplomatic” complex was in the making in Muscat under the Albusaidis despite the lack of a formal institutional structure, yet it remained divorced from the isolated interior still dominated by the *Ibadhi* Imamate. The shift from British to American predominance, coupled with the rise of Saudi Arabia in the region, the establishment of an Arab regional system after 1945, and the unstoppable wave of Arab national identification, caused unprecedented distress to the structure of the sultanate that instigated an isolationist policy under Said bin Taimur (Wilkinson, 1987).

Sultan Said remained embittered at his lone status outside a now-established Arab regional regime that despite an Egyptian-Saudi rivalry that echoed Soviet-American bipolarity was opposed to the old British regime in the Middle East; Said’s favorite patrons and only security guarantor alongside India (Al-Khalili, 2009: 24). By 1970 Muscat had to cope with the changes it resisted for long through Qaboos’s reforms, which culminated in joining the AL, coming to terms with an Arab identity, and containing the *Ibadhi* north, yet with structural continuities still shaping the sultanate’s behaviour in the region – most importantly relations with post-1979 Iran.

Muscat’s perception of Iran remains fully geopolitical almost ignoring the radical regime shift that took place in 1979. This reflects an institutional continuity that characterizes the rule of the Albusaidis whose commercial empire instilled a geopolitical understanding of foreign policy far from having ideological underpinnings. This was the reason why Oman came to terms very late with the dynamics of Arab nationalism and the partly ideological cold war. Muscat’s perception of Iran as well as Israel reflects a lack of association with Arab strategic calculations that still colour the foreign policies of most Arab states even those who signed peace treaties with Israel. By the same token, its close ties to India and special relations with Britain reflect similar continuities between Qaboos and his predecessors, and a legacy of its strong association with the now-defunct Anglo-Indian regional system. Conclusively, Muscat’s exceptional foreign policy does not reflect its unique culture. It is a

structural outcome of its weak affinity with the Arab regional system and thus naturally predispose it to play the role of a neutral mediator within this system.

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## **Saving the GCC: Kuwait's Mediation Role in the Gulf Crisis**

*Dr. Tahani Al-Terkait*

### **Introduction**

Since June 2017, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been in stalemate. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain joined Egypt (a non-GCC member; these four countries making up an Arab Quartet) in announcing the severing of diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar. They ordered: "The withdrawal of ambassadors from Doha and the expulsion of Qatari diplomats, the closure of airspace to all flights to and from Qatar and the closure of the land border crossing between Qatar and Saudi Arabia" (Starbird, 2017).

Bilateral disputes between GCC members have occurred previously on different levels; but the current crisis is hugely jeopardizing the efficacy of one of the very few regional organizations in the Arab world. The GCC has become profoundly dysfunctional.

The Arab Quartet accused Qatar of violating the Riyadh agreement signed in 2014; and made a list of 13 demands it expected Qatar to abide by and implement in order to end the blockade. These were later reduced, but include:

"Cutting ties with terrorist organizations named as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah and The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) [...]; closing al Jazeera and several other media outlets believed to be funded by Qatar; end all contacts with opposition movements in the Quartet countries, closing all diplomatic representation in Iran; throwing out a recently established Turkish military base in Qatar; aligning itself fully with other Gulf countries' foreign policies" (Kinninmont, 2019).

Within the GCC, only Kuwait and Oman have not taken sides (Schanzer and Koduvayur, 2018). Both countries are traditionally neutral and prudent in their foreign policies. They "have pursued policies that have sought to de-escalate multiple flashpoints, including preventing the blockade of Qatar from escalating into outright conflict, seeking a mediated solution, all the while holding together what remains of the GCC security structure" (Coates Ulrichsen, 2019).

In this context, the focus of this paper is to shed light on Kuwait's mediating role in the ongoing crisis; and why it is so determined to end it and revive the regional and collective role of the GCC. I argue that this is not surprising, as it stems from four intrinsic factors, which have shaped Kuwaiti foreign policy since independence in 1961.

## **The Diplomacy of Mediation and Philanthropy**

It is one of the main pillars of Kuwait's foreign policy. Moreover, protecting the security and stability of the GCC is a goal, not an end, in Kuwait's regional politics. For Abdulridha Aseeri (Note 1), "since its independence in 1961 [...] the dynamics of Kuwait's foreign policy are vital and salient" for the following reasons:

1. Kuwait has a reactive foreign policy: it, a small state, is influenced, not an influencer, of broader international affairs. Regional challenges and international events have an impact on Kuwait's internal politics, which sometimes ignites internal tensions.
2. Given its small territory and population, Kuwait is militarily vulnerable to any external aggression. It is more secure under a regional umbrella like the GCC.
3. Kuwait has employed its wealth to support international organizations and countries in need. In its pursuit of economic diplomacy, it established the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development only a few months after independence, with the aim of providing technical and financial support for developing countries. Primarily, the Fund sought to assist Arab countries in their economic development; but in 1974, its scope was expanded to include developing countries. Aid and international responsibility become a diplomatic shield for Kuwait to build bridges of friendship and cooperation with countries around the globe.
4. Kuwait must be present diplomatically: as a small state, Kuwait cannot isolate itself from the international community. Keeping fraternal relations with neighboring countries is a must to avoid regional ruptures and conflicts and maintain equilibrium. Developing and enhancing political, economic and social security through the GCC provides the best strategy to survive in such a volatile world (Aseeri, 2017).

### **Kuwait as a Mediator: Examples from the Past**

The current crisis is not the first occasion on which Kuwait has attempted to mediate in intra-GCC disputes involving Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 2004, Sheikh Sabah, then Kuwaiti Prime Minister, participated in France in negotiations that sought common ground between the Saudi and Qatari leadership after Riyadh had withdrawn its ambassador from Doha in 2002, partly in displeasure at al Jazeera's coverage of regional events (Coates Ulrichsen, 2019).

Kuwaiti mediation resolved the dispute between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over the Northern Yemen civil war; as well as helping end the Shah of Iran's claims to Bahrain, which gradually led to independence of the latter in 1971. Kuwait helped resolve the conflict between Pakistan and Bangladesh in the early 1970s; and contained the events of Black September

between the Jordanian Armed Forces and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in September 1970. Kuwait also sought to end the conflict between Northern and Southern Yemen in 1972 (Al-Shayji, 2019).

In 1990, though, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait led to a significant shift in the latter's approach towards regional affairs. Inevitably, Kuwaiti policy was now centered on its liberation: so instead of being neutral, it now employed terminology such as "opposing countries" in reference to all countries who supported the invasion.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Kuwait's foreign policy regained its balance and restored its old diplomatic approach towards international affairs.

### **The GCC as a Regional Collective Institution**

As a collective regional body, the pivotal role of the GCC in liberating Kuwait in 1991 cannot be underestimated. "Ending the [current Gulf] crisis means the revival of the GCC's regional role, a body whose creations Kuwait initiated, and has historically relied on to protect its sovereignty and interests in a geopolitically tension region" (Gulf International Forum, 2018).

Kuwait's visionary Amir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah (1977-2006), felt the urge to unite the nations of the Arab peninsula against the escalating threat of Iran and the regional tensions caused by the war between Iran and Iraq. On May 16, 1976, he met with Sheikh Zayed of the UAE and discussed his fledgling idea. This was then publicly set out in Amman in November 1980, before the GCC was officially established on May 25, 1981.

Hence, as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen has explained, Kuwait's intense frustration regarding the ongoing crisis now:

"The damage done to the GCC as an institution is deeply felt in a country that was one of the architects of its creation in 1981, and whose leaders have devoted much of the past four decades to building and strengthening collective policy responses to shared region wide concerns in the Gulf" (Coates Ulrichsen, 2019).

### **Turbulent Region: Shift in Balance of Power**

Since the Arab Spring of 2011, the region has faced an unprecedented series of events, paving the way for a shift in the balance of power and division among the GCC's members.

In his speech before the emergency GCC summit on May 18, 2019, the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, highlighted that for many years, the region has endured war and conflict which has compounded pain and deepened wounds. Now, dangerous and accelerating developments threatened the region's collective security, and

were causing unprecedented tension. He called on the GCC's leaders to restore unity: which had enabled it to develop common action and confront many dangers and challenges over the preceding four decades.

He appealed to the rulers of the Gulf monarchies to achieve the aspirations of their peoples and put aside their differences in order to overcome critical regional challenges. Further escalation and tension would, he warned, only lead to confrontation and destruction of the region's precious resources. Thus, he called for wisdom to prevail; in his view, dialog was the only way of preventing further war (The Peninsula, 2019).

The main reason behind the Qatar blockade is Doha's shift in its foreign policy. Qatar is no longer prepared to be under Saudi Arabia's wing. According to Shafeeq Ghabra, "we see a new axis in the region, a new power structure, and Qatar has a new birth of its own. It is liberated from certain contexts and relations; it can build new strategies, structures and approaches. The blockade and the sanctions can slowly collapse under their own weight and out of their own irrationalism" (Starbird, 2017). The Arab Quartet, though, robustly oppose Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood; its open channels with Turkey and Iran; and its international media outlet, al Jazeera.

### **Kuwait's Wise Leadership**

In 2014, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, named Sheikh Sabah a "world humanitarian leader" and called Kuwait a "global humanitarian center" after an international conference held there to help the displaced and devastated civilians of the Syrian conflict raised some \$2.4bn (with \$500m of this pledged by Kuwait).

Sabah has been dubbed the "Dean of Arab diplomacy" for his efforts to strengthen Kuwait's relations in the Middle East. He served for four decades as Foreign Minister before becoming Prime Minister in 2003, then Amir in 2006. In addition to his outstanding humanitarian record, he continues to work behind the scenes for peace in the Middle East, using contacts he developed during his time as Foreign Minister.

From the start of the Qatar crisis, he has been a key figure. He embarked on a frenetic round of shuttle diplomacy in the opening days of the crisis and, at a press conference with US President Trump in September 2017, suggested that his efforts had successfully prevented military action. Sabah and senior members of the Kuwaiti government have continued to relay messages between the two sides to keep an indirect channel of communication open. The crisis has settled into a prolonged face-off which, so far, has defied easy resolution (Coates Ulrichsen, 2019).

## Conclusion

Two years since the Qatar crisis began, the blockade is still ongoing: yet both parties (Qatar and the Arab Quartet) seem to be surviving, regardless of the consequences. Some observers described the Kuwait attempts at mediation as a failure; others claimed that it signaled the effective end of the GCC. However, I conclude somewhat differently.

Despite the ramifications of the crisis, Kuwait's persistence with its diplomatic endeavors has remained. When the blockade was announced, the Amir pledged his best efforts in re-uniting the GCC. "We will not give up our historical responsibilities and we will remain committed to them until the negative developments are over and our skies are clear again" (Toumi, 2017). His entreaties towards Gulf monarchs at the recent emergency summit discussed above only underscored this (Kuwait News Agency, 2019).

The current crisis is complex and challenging. It may take a very considerable length of time to resolve. Yet there has been some progress made thanks to Kuwait's efforts: not only in preventing military action against Qatar (al Jazeera, 2017); but in reducing the original 13 demands from the Arab Quartet to only six (Calamur, 2017).

"More international efforts should be directed at re-uniting the GCC, including considerably more support for Kuwait's efforts at mediation, dialog and maintaining peaceful channels. Kuwait's ability to bridge regional and international approaches to diplomacy remains vital. Currently in the second year of a two-year term as one of the 10 rotating members of the UN Security Council, [Kuwait has supported diplomatic, humanitarian and reconstruction initiatives in Yemen, Syria and Iraq](#), in partnership with international organizations and other Security Council members" (Coates Ulrichsen, 2019).

Finally, further research is needed which examines the role of small states such as Kuwait in a turbulent world: enriching the field of Gulf studies and understandings of the region itself.

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## Notes

Note 1. Abdulridha Aseeri is a political scientist at Kuwait University and board member of the National Council of Human Rights in Kuwait

## **The Impact of Security Threat Perception on the Unity of the GCC**

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is facing unprecedented challenges, due to the rising security threats and regional rivalry among major Middle Eastern powers. The Iranian rising influence represented a grave threat to some GCC members, notably Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (UAE), especially after its intervention in Bahrain to support Shiite terrorist organizations, as well as supporting Houthi militias in Yemen. However, other members like Qatar and Oman did not perceive Iran as a threat. On the other hand, Turkey and Qatar adopted policies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring that are perceived as threatening to both Saudi Arabia and UAE, especially their support to political Islam groupings, most notably Muslim Brotherhood. Ankara's subsequent utilization of Jamal Khashoggi assassination to create international pressure over Riyadh further elevated the perception of Turkey as a threat. Despite this rising regional divisions, the United States (US) is attempting to resolve the Qatari crisis in order to restore the unity of GCC and establish Middle East Security Alliance (MESA), widely known as "Arab Nato", which will be responsible for countering the Iranian Influence.

This paper tries to assess the threat perception of various Arab Gulf countries, and how this perception will assess or impede the formation of a security alliance, whether under the umbrella of GCC or an American-led alliance. The paper argues that divergent threat perceptions are the main responsible for the current rift inside GCC, and that will impede the formation of any alliance. In an attempt to test this assumption, the paper first discusses the concepts regarding threat perception and alliance formation. Second, the paper focuses on how GCC countries perceive Iran and the Arab Muslim groupings, and whether they are perceived as a threat or an asset. Finally, the American efforts to establish MESA are assessed from the viewpoint of threat perception.

### **Threat Perception and Alliance Formation**

International relations' scholars have long assumed that threat perception played a central role in theories of war, deterrence, alliances, and conflict resolution. Initially threat was equated to power, especially military power, according to the dictates of the realist theory. Therefore, scholars assumed equivalence between "objective" measures of power and threat assessment (Gross Stein, 2013). Countries fear the military strength of neighbors, and regards it as a potential threat. Therefore, countries will try to act to balance against them,

according to the principles of the classic balance-of-power politics (Gause, 2007). However, this realist thinking that rests only on material forces was contradicted by other international relation scholars, especially constructivist, who argued that “Identity forms the backdrop to the formation of conceptions of threat, opportunity, and interests” (Lynch, 2002: 26). States invoke collective identity and norms competitively to enhance their power in the regional order, and to counter similar tactics from their rivals. This conception is applicable to the Middle East, as Lynch considers it one key component of competition in the Arab regional order (Lynch, 2002). According to Gause (2003/4: 303), leaders in the Middle East do not weight external threat to their state security based upon adversary’s military capabilities and perceived intentions only, but also, they take in considerations external challenges to their domestic legitimacy and security, especially that is related to transnational ideological platforms of Islam and pan-Arabism.

Taking in consideration both material and Ideational aspects in formulating threat perception, it could be argued that common threat perception is an a priori requisite for the establishment of any security alliance. Alliance, in turn for the purpose of this paper, will be defined as: “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more states and involving mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions in the future. Neither the degree of commitment, nor the specific form of policy coordination, or conditions under which it would take place need be explicit” (Barnett and Levy, 1991: 370). According to realist thinking, alliances pool resources between states to thwart a common threat, thus the existence of direct external threats is a crucial factor for the establishment and strengthening of an alliance (Omuka, 2002: 3). Consequently, if the countries do not share the same threat perception, then the alliance formation will be in doubt. On the other hand, constructivists argue that ideology is a cornerstone in the formation of any alliance. In this context, Owen argues that ideologies can be a motivating factor behind establishing an alliance (Lemmons, 2012). This assumption holds true, especially when the alliance is utilized “not just in the traditional sense, as external defense pacts”, but also and perhaps even more often for facing internal security threats (Ryan, 2019: 9). In addition, ideology should not be considered the only factor directing the formation of an alliance, as material forces count, especially the perception of the military power of the adversaries. Consequently, this paper utilizes the realist and constructivist theories when analyzing the GCC countries threat perception, in an attempt to understand how their perceptions of threat may assist or impede the formation of a security alliance among them.

Threat perception could be considered one of the factors that played an important role in explaining the current polarization within the GCC, especially when coming to how GCC reacted to the rising threats and disorder the region witnessed after the eruption of Arab Spring protests in 2011. In this context, it could be argued that two forces have crystalized in the post Arab spring era, that was perceived, either as threatening or opportunity by the

GCC countries. These two forces are the Shiite militias sponsored by Iran, as well as the political Islamic grouping, especially Muslim Brotherhood, as both forces tried to dominate the Arab countries in the post Arab Spring era. Therefore, the next two sections will be dedicated to analyzing the GCC threat perception to the two forces.

### **Iran as a Threat**

The fear of military attack by another superior military power is part of the threat perceptions of the Arab Gulf states. This could be attributed to two factors. First, the region witnessed several wars since the 1980s, like the Iranian - Iraqi war (1980 – 1988); the Gulf War (1990 – 1991); and the Iraqi War (2003 – 2011), and the war against “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq (2014 – 2019). Second, several regional states tried to acquire nuclear programs, and potentially nuclear weapons. Saddam Hussein tried to obtain nuclear weapons in the 1980s, while Iran is currently having a nuclear infrastructure, and continuously threatening to transfer its nuclear program to a military one (Gause, 2003/4). This, in return, was reflected in the security landscape of the region. States in the region spend huge amounts of money on arms, and are among the highest levels of military spending as a percentage of GDP in the world. Currently, Iran represents a grave threat according to some GCC countries. This is related to Iran’s conventional military capabilities, and its aggressive policies towards its neighbors, and its utilization of the sectarian card to claim guardianship over all Shiite communities in the Arab countries, and sponsoring a number of Shiite Armed Non-state actors, and finally its hostile expansionist policies towards several Arab gulf countries.

Iran’s aggressive and expansionist policies were evident in its occupation of the three Emirati islands-Abu Musa, Lesser and Greater Tunb in 1971 (Belfer, 2014: 33). Bahrain constitute another country, where Tehran tried to project its power on the peninsula. Despite the fact that Bahrain has never been ruled by Iran (Al Khalifa, 2014: 3), the ruling elite has always insisted that Manama constituted parts of Iran’s territory. Iran’s shah made claims to the Island during the period Britain was withdrawing from the Gulf, while Khomeini sent messengers to Bahrain soon after he consolidated power (Belfer, 2014: 35). These claims continued unabated. In 2007, the semi-official *Kayhan* newspaper ran an editorial that asserted an Iranian claim to Bahrain (The Guardian, 2011). Iran’s interests in Bahrain cannot be separated from its tendency to project power against its regional rival namely, Saudi Arabia (Belfer, 2014: 32). Riyadh also perceives Tehran negatively, as it regards Iran’s direct sponsorship of Shiite groups in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province as a particularly direct threat to Saudi Arabia’s national security (Barnes-Dacey, Geranmayeh and Lovatt, 2018: 3-4). Iran’s development of ballistic missiles is another concern, not only for Saudi Arabia, but most of the GCC countries (Young, 2016). This type of threat was elevated in the aftermath of the Houthis utilization of Iranian ballistic missiles in attacking Saudi Arabia.

Kuwait, on the other hand, regarded Iran as a threat, especially after the Iranian revolution, when Tehran tried to infiltrate the Kuwaiti Shiite community, which is estimated to be one third of the population (Ehteshami, Quilliam and Bahgat, 2017: 8). In December 12, 1983, Iranian backed Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Da'wa carried out a series of seven coordinated bombings in Kuwait, that targeted among others the American and French embassies, the Kuwait airport, and a Kuwait National Petroleum Company oil rig, and a power station. It is noteworthy to mention that both groups acted in the explicit service of Iran (Levitt, 2012). Despite Kuwait's support of the nuclear deal between Iran and US, the former did not change its policies towards Kuwait. One revealing example is the "Abdalli cell", which was caught by the Kuwaiti police on August 13, 2015 in a farmhouse in the Abdalli city near the border with Iraq. The police found that the cell have an enormous weapons cache, that included over 40,000 pounds of ammunition, 300 pounds of explosives, 68 weapons and 204 grenades (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2015). The cell received training and support from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, and were convicted by Kuwait for inter-alia plotting "hostile acts" against the state. In response, Kuwait expelled three-quarters of Iran's diplomatic staff, including the Ambassador (Shihabi, 2017).

Still, Kuwait apparently favors dialogue with Iran to resolve regional tensions, and the former offered to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Reuters, 2017), and opposes Trump's sanctions against Iran. This was evident in Kuwaiti position on Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal, as the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry emphasizing that it welcomed the signing of the 2015 accord, and that while it "understands and respects the U.S. move", Kuwait still recognize that the deal could "contribute to boosting regional stability, despite realizing that it did not fully respond to the concerns of countries in the region resulting from Iran's negative conduct with these states", which represents a further indication that Kuwait still favors negotiating with Iran (Sands, 2018), despite Iran's aggressive policies.

Oman and Qatar, on the other hand, perceive Tehran, less as a threat. Muscat has cordial historical relations with Tehran. During the early 1970s, Iran assisted Oman in suppressing a rebellion in the southern part of the country, by sending 4,000 troops, which managed to consolidate the ruling regime grip over the country (Schmierer, 2015: 113). Furthermore, Oman is the only Muslim-majority country in which the predominant Islamic sect is Ibadism, which is distinct from both Sunni and Shiite (Ibid: 114), thus, Oman does not perceive any threat from Iran's utilization of the Shiite card, contrary to other Arab Gulf countries, who have Shiite minorities. Due to this close relations, Oman hosted secret talks between the United States (US) and Iran starting from 2013, thus playing a crucial role in the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A move that was criticized by both Saudi Arabia and UAE as dismissive of GCC security concerns. They even blamed Oman of not exerting enough efforts to stop arms smuggling from Iran through its territory to the Houthis in Yemen (European Council for Foreign Relations, 2018).

In addition, both Oman and Iran have preserved over the years a strong military and security cooperation, that sustained all the regional tensions that erupted between Riyadh and Tehran. The last of which came in April 2019, when a memorandum of understanding (MoU) were signed by military officials from both countries to enhance cooperation in various military spheres. It is noteworthy to pinpoint that the MoU came after a joint military drill were held in the waters of Oman, that witnessed the participation, not only of Units from the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force of Oman, and the Navy of Islamic Republic of Iran Army, but also the Navy of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) (Eurasia Review, 2019).

For its part, Qatar has not been threatened by Iranian sabotage and both countries have sustained close relations over the years. However, the palace coup of 1995 triggered a rift between Doha and Riyadh. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the new emir of Qatar, started to provoke the Saudis by focusing on the border-dispute issues and by supporting anti-Saudi propaganda via the Qatari-based al Jazeera network (Guzansky, 2015: 114), and hence Doha perceived its relation with Tehran as a mean to break free from Saudi influence. Iran, in return, regarded its relations with Doha, as a tool to drive wedge between GCC countries (Ibid).

In addition, both countries share a large natural gas field in the Persian Gulf (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 9), and signed a Defense cooperation agreement in early 2010, according to which, Doha and Tehran will enhance cooperation in training, and in making joint campaigns against terrorism in the region (Mehr News Agency, 2010). Expectedly, Qatar has also always argued that dialogue with Iran is key to reducing regional tensions. Despite strong relations with Iran, Qatar has always feared Iran's military arsenal, and thought to enhance its missile defense systems through acquiring American defense systems, and negotiating deals with leading US defense companies (Burt, 2017). It is noteworthy to pinpoint that Iran continued to pursue its malign activities in the region, despite the Obama's administration willingness to negotiate, and eventual agreement to sign the Iranian nuclear deal formally known as "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" signed in July 2015. The agreement provided Iran with additional resources to fund its proxies and destabilize the region, as evident in its intervention in Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

The divergent threat perception, as well as differences among Arab gulf countries on how to contain Iran is reflected in another aspect, which is GCC's attitudes towards Trump's sanctions against Iran. The hawkish US administration on Iran's regional policies has represented an opportunity for Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain to contain Iran in a way that was impossible under the previous president. In their assessment, the nuclear deal has many loopholes, and hence Trump's withdrawal from the deal, in addition to the re-impositions of sanctions on Iran, may open the way for negotiation a better deal, and limit Iran's influence in conflict-ridden countries (Barnes-Dacey, Geranmayeh and Lovatt, 2018:

4). Oman and Kuwait prefer to preserve negotiations with Tehran, which make them lose from any confrontation or sanctions against Iran, as opportunities for economic engagement with Iran will be lost (Mogielnicki and Sudetic, 2018). This is particularly applicable to Oman, which has little oil reserves, and is attempting to diversify their economy through utilizing its strategic position, and inviting Iranian investments in the Omani ports, especially Port of Duqm, Sohar Port and the Free Zone (Financial Tribune, 2018). Confrontation with Iran or imposing economic sanctions will jeopardize such objective. In addition, Kuwait's investment plans seek to establish Silk City and the Northern Gulf Gateway, an integrated economic free zone, that would position Kuwait as the premier entry point to Iran and Iraq (Ibid).

On the other hand, one of the main cause of tensions in Arab Gulf countries is the economic not the security dimension. Jebel 'Ali in Dubai is the main regional hub for all gulf countries, but, in the medium to the long term, a number of Gulf ports, especially Omani port of al-Duqm and Salalah may narrow the distances with Jebel 'Ali. Other big projects like the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran will likely enhance rivalries among Gulf players (Ardemagni, 2018). The IRGC is held responsible by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and USA for intervention in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and for supporting a network of Shiite militias that has directed threats to Saudi Arabia.

### **The Muslim Brotherhood**

Saudi Arabia and UAE, in particular, perceives the Muslim Brotherhood, as a security and political threat. UAE cracked down on the *al-Islah*, an organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Likewise, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in his interview with The New York Times, considered the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as the basis of all terrorist organizations, emphasizing that both Osama bin Laden, the Chief of the Al Qaeda, and al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, were members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Qandil, 2018). Kuwait even dedicated a parliamentary session to discuss MB's activities in the Gulf (Abbasi, 2016: 102).

In 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Doha for eight months, after accusing the latter of undermining their domestic security through its support to the Muslim Brotherhood (Reuters, 2014). The relations were restored after Qatar pledged to comply with the demands of the three countries. However, Qatar renegaded on its promises, prompting the Arab Quartet countries, represented in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt in boycotting Qatar, and presenting a list of 13 demands to Qatar, that the latter should comply with in order to normalize relations. The overwhelming majority of which are relevant to Qatar's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran and Turkey (Trager, 2017).

The Saudi and Emirati perception of the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat could be attributed to two factors. First, the MB was perceived as an internal security threat. The MB was present in the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s. Gradually, the Gulf countries started to perceive them as a threat, starting from the 1990s. The Emirati government gradually viewed *al-Islah* as a threat to the country's national cohesion, because of the group's loyalty to the Brotherhood's General Guide (Hedges and Cafiero, 2017: 137). In addition, during the early 1990s, the Egyptian authorities insisted that *al-Islah* had been funding Egypt's terrorist organization Islamic Jihad through its Committee for Relief and Outside Activities (Ibid). Such a threat perception was elevated in 2013, when Abu Dhabi tried 70 Emirati nationals for being members of *al-Islah*, which was accused of planning in collusion with foreign "help, expertise and financial support" to seize power in UAE (Peel and Hall, 2013).

Second, the rise of the political groupings affiliated to the MB in several Arab countries in the aftermath of the Arab spring was perceived as threatening. These groups reached to a tacit understanding with the US, and were supported by regional countries like Turkey and Qatar. Doha along with Turkey, appeared to enhance its regional influence through investing in their relations with the Muslim Brotherhood groupings in the Arab Spring countries, most notably Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria among others. Such an alliance appears to be ideological in nature, as both Doha and Ankara have a close ideological inclination to the MB, as its emir was closely linked to the Egyptian-born cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the de facto MB's spiritual guide who had resided in Doha since 1961. In addition, al Jazeera provided a platform to promote the group's ideology and its key figures like Qaradawi (Trager, 2017).

Furthermore, in countries, which descended into civil wars, as in Libya and Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood groupings, resorted to arms, and entered into a shady relation with extremist groups, like Al Qaeda. That is why al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared in a recording in which he defended the Muslim Brotherhood against accusations of terrorism (Obaid, 2018). Both Qatar and Turkey continued their support to the MB unabated, whether politically or militarily. In Syria, Erdogan assured al-Assad that Turkey would turn a blind eye to his regime's suppression of the opposition in 2011 in return for giving the banned members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood a quarter of the ministerial posts in the cabinet. As the war unfolded, Ankara and Doha coordinated their effort to support, politically and militarily, the MB (Gurpinar, 2015: 29), as well as other extreme organizations like Al Qaeda affiliate Al Nusra front (Stutzriem and Cornell, 2017). In Libya, both Doha and Ankara supported the MB militarily against Qaddafi and after its ouster, the affiliated party; "The Justice and Construction Party". This external support has undermined the group legitimacy as a credible political actor (Trauthig, 2018), and thus played a role in its defeat in the 2013 parliamentary elections. Qatar supported the subsequent military control of Tripoli by the Libyan MB, and its allies, and continued to fund and support Islamist factions in Libya, with money, arms, and foreign fighters. These actions were orchestrated by Muhammad Hamad

al-Hajri, *chargé d'affaires* at the Qatari embassy in Libya (McGregor, 2017). UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other hand supported Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), whose army fight the Islamist and extremist groups in Tripoli.

The different threat perception was evident in the Gulf different perception of the development that Egypt witnessed in the aftermath of the ouster of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. While Qatar and Turkey (Ryan, 2019: 10) supported the government led by politicians of the Muslim Brotherhood, other Gulf monarchies backed the removal of Morsi (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Most recently, the unfolding events in Sudan, which is considered by some, the second wave of popular protests in the Middle East opened a new regional rift. Whereas Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt appear to be backing the country's generals, who ousted President Omar al-Bashir, and an ally to Turkey and Qatar, both countries are more closely aligned with Sudan's Islamists (Marcus, 2019).

In a sense, the unfolding Arab spring intensified the regional rivalry over who is going to dominate the political systems of the major Arab countries after the Arab spring. A development, which will ultimately have an impact on the regional balance of power, between Saudi Arabia and UAE on one hand, and Qatar and Turkey on the other hand. Again, Kuwait and Oman don't consider MB as a threat, as they are a legitimate political party in the former, while they are not a domestic faction in the latter.

### **Prospects of a US-led Arab NATO**

Amid divergent threat perceptions among Arab Gulf countries, it is hard to conceive the possibility of establishing an effective security alliance, despite the Qatari participation in the 18th meeting of GCC ground forces commanders on March 5, 2019 at the General Secretariat headquarters in Riyadh (Defense World, 2019), as this move was not accompanied by resolving the Qatari crisis. Against this regional turmoil, US put forward the idea of establishing the "Middle East Security Alliance" in 2017, which is intended mainly to contain the Iranian regional threats, and shift the burden of containing Iran from US solely to the six Arab gulf countries, in addition to Egypt and Jordan under the American defense umbrella (DePetris, 2018). However, as mentioned above different threat perception among GCC countries towards Iran will hamper these efforts. While Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain perceive Iran as a threat that should be contained, Qatar and Oman regard Tehran positively, and prefer establishing stronger economic relations with it. Kuwait, on the other hand regards negotiating with Iran, as the best strategy.

On the other hand, it is unconceivable that Egypt is going to participate in a security alliance with Qatar, as a time when both countries are supporting different warring factions in Libya. In this context, Cairo decided to withdraw its support to MESA on the eve of the meeting in Riyadh on April 7, 2019 (Asia News, 2019). Cairo's decision came despite its active

participation in the Yemeni war, intended to contain the Houthis, Iran's proxy in Yemen, and given the fact that Cairo has the largest and most structured army in the Arab world, Egypt's withdrawal is more than symbolic (Ibid).

In the final analysis, it should be recalled that common threat perception is a decisive factor in establishing and sustaining any security alliance. The lack of such a common perception will hamper any effort to establish any American led security alliance in the region. Thus, the only viable option would be the continued reliance on the American defense umbrella on bilateral basis, as well as establishing ad-hoc security alliance directed mainly to contain a specific threat, as in the "Arab coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen", which is directed mainly to contain the Houthi threats.

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## **Iran, Turkey and the Qatar Crisis with the GCC. Emerging Middle Powers in the Middle East and their Struggle for Hegemony**

*Dr. Alberto Gasparetto*

### **Preliminary Conceptual Definitions**

According to the main academic debates, a univocal definition of “middle power” still does not exist. Notwithstanding, hundreds of academic works have pointed to the increasing role of a bunch of emerging economies under the acronym of “BRICS” (which stays for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in international relations for at least the past two decades. The present time is characterized by a high dose of fluidity in international politics as a consequence of a relative decline in United States (US) hegemony and likewise a power redistribution as of 9/11, the economic crisis in 2008 and especially the Arab revolts in 2011. Besides, a great attention has lately been paid even to “near-BRICS” of “MIKTA” (an acronym for Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia), designating “a group of countries which are consolidated democracies or hybrid regimes with a significant potential for further democratization” (Önis and Kutlay, 2017: 165). However, even if “confusion reigns supreme” (Robertson, 2017), a basic definition grounded on some broadly accepted common features is required.

In general, a primary step is about locating middle powers in the middle of a spectrum ranging from “small states” to “great powers” or “superpowers”. Intuitively, such a devised definition must depend on certain factors or functions a middle power is supposed to possess. However, difficulties, contradictions and misunderstandings can emerge as a result of idiosyncratic debates within specific countries claiming to belong to such a category. According to Jeffrey Robertson (2017: 366), “with the growth of the number of states claiming to be middle powers, policymakers and commentators are pushing for their inclusion in a separate category. They are not middle powers, but ‘significant powers’, ‘entrepreneurial powers’, ‘constructive powers’ or even ‘top-20 nations’”. Consequently, a list of some generally common criteria can be made upon catching a glimpse to from some renowned scholarly works (Soward, 1963; Hoolbraad, 1971; Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993; Carr, 2014). Most of them point to location between great-power system, their size between great and small powers, their position with reference to ideological or political systems. Material capacity is usually considered one of the lowest common denominators alongside behaviour, identity and role. Material capacity is a function of a state’s size in terms of geography and population, and it is also related to economic and military

capabilities. Normally, the greater the state is in terms of population, the greater in its economic performance can be expected. At the same time, the greater the economic performances, the more sizeable possession of technology, the greater results in military capabilities.

Any middle power may not even satisfy all those conditions, but just some of them. This helps explain Iran's exceptionalism. In spite of generally being considered as a great regional power, it is not taken into account when elaborating the definition of "middle power". As mentioned below, Iran makes up for its long-standing negative economic performances by projecting abroad its influence and acting as a "role model" for some other regional countries and local actors. Anoush Ehteshami (2014) contends that none of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states, neither Turkey nor Iran, satisfies all the established criteria for "middle power", but they just meet some of them. In particular, Ehteshami's argument goes on, even if MENA countries are often bestowed middle power status, they must be considered just as "great regional powers". Indeed, the concept of "middle power" "has the dimensions of global power politics at its heart", that is to play whatever role in other regions.

Jeffrey Robertson (2017) criticizes the most authoritative academic definitions, by stating that they excessively suffer from domestic political discourse. On the contrary he advances a more pragmatic definition, based on the geographical and historical context within which a supposed middle power operates: "in the context of global governance in the 2010s, a middle power ought to be considered as a state with an interest in and capacity (material resources, diplomatic influence, creativity, etc.) to work proactively in concert with similar states to contribute to the development and strengthening on institutions for the governance of the global commons" (Ibid: 367).

Another intriguing definition of "emerging middle power" is given by Öniş And Kutlay (2017), particularly tailored for the Turkish case. By recognizing that world politics has been experiencing a relative decline in the United States (US) hegemony as well as a high degree of fluidity corresponding to the emergence of regionalism (Buzan and Weaver, 2003), they state that emerging middle powers "play a productive role in a rapidly shifting global environment" under four critical conditions: a) emerging as "role models" for other countries, both regionally and globally, depending on their democratic and economic performance and using soft power; b) an effective capability of building coalitions under a set of normative values or principles; c) a balance between expectations and effective capabilities, by recognizing its structural limits as a middle power; d) the ability of giving their contribution to specific "niche areas" through the use of diplomacy.

All this considered, and for the purposes of this paper, I argue that a state can be included within the category of a "middle power" whether it satisfies at least two conditions: a) to

possess such material capabilities (in terms of territory extension, population, economic resources) that it can exert enough influence on international politics and on the most important issues at the regional level; b) to recur to its soft power, mediate among competing interests and point of views not only among rival regional actors but also between great powers, and thus have a say on all the most important matters at the regional level by emerging as a reliable broker.

In turn, I argue that a “regional power” can be defined as a state aiming to leadership or hegemony in its respective region, by exercising a high degree of influence through both material and ideational capabilities. Material capabilities have to do with economic performances, possession of technology and energy sources as well as influence of energetic routes, military power; in turn, ideational capabilities refer to non-material resources, use of soft power tools such as diplomatic abilities, persuasion, wise use of religious and cultural kinship, acting as a role model and so on. In a nutshell, ideational resources refer to a state’s legitimate authority, its credibility, its legitimacy. What there must also be is an explicit claim for leadership which is either made directly a country’s political leaders or it is assumed by its behaviour and posture towards regional dynamics, its “active engagement within regional and international organizations, its pivotal role in crisis management and mediation activities, its identification and engagement with its region” (Parlar Dal, 2016: 1428). It goes without saying that if a state enjoys enough legitimacy, such a claim for regional leadership must receive broad acceptance, as underlined by Daniel Flemes (2007).

## **Turkey**

Among scholars who have extensively tried to conceptualize the case of Turkey, Emel Parlar Dal (2016) has noted that confusion is a constant due to the vagueness of any existing framework and the lack of empirical research as for regional power studies. She argues that the challenge to provide a definition has to do with the fluidity of the concept of “regional power” and its often-overlapping characteristics with that of “middle power”. For example, she classifies such countries as Brazil, India and South Africa (so-called IBSA) alongside with Turkey as “emerging regional powers”, detaching them from such more traditional middle powers such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. Odd but conceptually interesting at the same time. Once again, the need to look for common criteria is felt. By relying on extensive literature on the issue, Parlar Dal (2016: 1427) argues that “regional powers may be defined as powerful states in their respective region without looking at whether they pursue relations of enmity or amity”.

It is no doubt that Ankara’s foreign and Middle Eastern policy during almost the first decade of AK Parti in power was successful in achieving its openly declared goal: by borrowing Ahmet Davutoglu’s words, to establish a “zero-problems foreign policy” and aim at

performing a “strategic depth” (Davutoglu, 2010). Basic elements of that strategy were to rise as a power-broker in the region, to solve the most inflaming regional issues by exerting its soft-power – from the Israeli-Palestinian question to the Iranian nuclear issue, from the Israel-Syria rapprochement to the war on Jihadist terror and so on – be recognized as the most reliable regional power by both its neighbors and the external great powers. The May 2010 Mavi Marmara incident with Israel first and the 2011 Arab uprisings then made this layout crumble. Just against the backdrop of increasing tensions with the US, worsening relations with Damascus, diverging goals with Russia and Iran in Syria, the establishment of two threatening subjects along its borders – Kurdish Syrian Rojava and the Islamic State – Turkey continued to feed its bilateral relation with Qatar, due to “a public recognition that both states face common enemies, sponsor the same non-state actors, have similar reactions to numerous regional crises, and ultimately share several long-term objectives” (Cafiero and Wagner, 2016).

It is under this light that Turkey has sought to better pursue its own Neo-Ottoman design consisting in penetrating the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and other regions the old Kemalist elite considered as alien compared to their long-standing Western-oriented penchant, based on Turkey’s strategic alliance with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and efforts to gain the European Union (EU) membership. Upon the Arab revolts, contrary to such a staunch Kemalist belief as well as to the Davutoglu doctrine itself, Turkey has been tactically looking for partners holding its own same view about threats and sharing similar strategic goals. That was the case for the rapprochement with Russia in August 2016, after a nine-months period of freezing of bilateral relations following the downing of a jet on the Syrian skies on November 24, 2015. Henceforth, Turkey made a virtue of necessity with both Russia and Iran in Syria and found out an accommodation with them under the Astana framework.

Qatar in turn has been pursuing a more independent foreign policy beyond the GCC’s framework, irking Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who withdrew their ambassadors in March 2014 as a retaliation. When the crisis between Qatar and the GCC countries erupted in Summer 2017, Turkey was on the frontline to come to Doha’s rescue. Blamed of conducting a revisionist foreign policy, based on increasingly good ties with Turkey, advocacy of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt especially through its international TV channel al Jazeera and, above all, cordial relations with Iran, Qatar was put under air, land and naval blockade by some of the GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain) plus Egypt. Against the backdrop of rising tensions in the Middle East – from the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry in Syria and Yemen to the Iranian-Israeli enmity, from the everlasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the US-Russia competing entanglement in the region – Turkey tried to take advantage of this crisis by moving “to speed up the establishment of its military base in Qatar. [...] Turkish soldiers are currently based in Tariq bin Ziyad military base in Doha with the ultimate aim of expanding this base to hold 5000 troops in the future.

The two countries had their first joint exercise on August 1, 2017 with the participation of over 250 Turkish soldiers and 30 armored vehicles” (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2018: 6).

Both Qatar and Turkey represent two of US’ most important allies in the region. Despite rising tensions due to Ankara’s apparent disengagement from the West, Turkey is still considered as a crucial regional player, considering its strategic geographical position, its direct presence along the Syrian border, its centrality in the refugees deal with the EU, its relevance regarding energy transportation corridors, its role against jihadist and terrorist movements in the region. For all those reasons, many external players including the US and the EU, consider Turkey as a crucial partner. Indeed, Scholarly debates tend to include it within the category of “middle power”, even if at an “emerging” status yet.

Notwithstanding the fluidity in the system of regional alliances, especially after the outburst of Arab revolts, spurred Ankara to wholeheartedly move towards Qatar even at a military level. Indeed, Ankara has been increasingly felt threatened due to the evolving Syrian crisis. Bashar al-Assad’s ongoing stay in power, the increasing Russian and Iranian meddling in Syrian affairs, the US’ support for Kurdish armed forces in Syria against the Islamic state are all factors that have pushed Turkish AK Parti’s establishment to reorient the country’s foreign policy along different pillars compared to the recent past. Even if Turkey remains a staunch NATO ally, it has been forced to come to terms with Russia and accept both its overarching role in Syria and the presence of Iran – a country with which Turkey shares a longstanding tradition of economic cooperation coexisting with geopolitical rivalry.

The Arab revolts in North Africa and the reconfiguration of power in this Arab-dominated region have brought Qatar and Turkey even closer from a military and political point of view. Once again, their support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, especially upon the 2013 military coup against Mohamed Morsi’s electorally legitimized government, contributed to sour Qatar’s relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and to regionally isolate Turkey. While Ankara tried to sell its own view about a global conspiracy against democratically elected governments – by making a comparison between Morsi’s overthrow and the 2013 Gezi Park’s protests – Qatar pushed its support for the Muslim Brotherhood by providing sizeable financial aid and by harshly criticizing the military elite through its own TV channel al Jazeera (Baskan, 2016). Even more so, Turkey and Qatar found themselves on the same side in the Libyan crisis, where they have been financially and militarily supporting the internationally-recognized Government of National Accord led by Fayeze al-Sarraj against General Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, and strongly backed by the UAE.

In August 2018, Qatar’s Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Than pledged to invest US\$ 15 billion in Turkey to be channeled into Turkish financial markets and banks (Mogielnicki, 2018). Such a move came even to Turkey’s rescue, considering its economic hardship, with high unemployment, plummeting of domestic currency, loss of domestic purchasing power and

Erdogan's faltering consensus. The deepening of economic relations includes also the energy sector, as in September 2017 state-run company Qatargas signed an agreement with Turkey's Botas to supply of 1,5 million tons of natural gas each year for three years (Reuters, 2017). Turkish-Qatari bilateral trade amounted to US\$ 1,5 billion in 2017, with an intention to soon reach US\$ 5 billion (Shoeb, 2018). However, although those figures suggest that Qatar and Turkey have a reciprocal will in boosting economic ties, they need to be put into context with other regional partners having relations with each of them.

First of all, Turkey's bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia and the UAE combined amounted to US\$ 14 billion in 2016, almost ten times compared to US\$ 1,5 billion with Qatar; the total amount of Saudi and UAE companies operating in Turkey are 1481, while the Qatari firms are just 117; the amount of EU investment in Turkey accounts for more than 2/3 of the total – US\$ 150 billion, exactly ten times of the figure Qatar pledged to Turkey (Mogielnicki, 2018). Even considering Turkey's dependence on energy imports, it is worth saying that despite increasingly consistent oil and gas imports from Qatar, it is negligible compared to other such partners as Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, nd). At the same time, Qatar continues to be more reliant on economic relations with its GCC partners. For example, even if Turkey is the fourth country to import Qatar's non-oil products (6,1%), Oman is by far the first and foremost partner, with 44% of the total amount (Qatar Chamber, 2017).

All those arguments considered, it is worth noting that in spite of Turkey-Qatar convergence of military and political goals in the MENA region, their burgeoning economic relation still cannot represent a valid element to counterbalance the deep ties each of them have with the GCC (Oxford Gulf & Arabian Peninsula Forum, 2017). This is a remarkable limit when one contextualizes their bilateral relations in the regional landscape. The current Libyan situation underlines how their respective situation vis-à-vis the UAE could potentially be explosive. At the same time, it suggests how cautiously they are called to play in order to avoid further and irreversible collision with the UAE and, by extension, Saudi Arabia. However, from the Turkish perspective, both the Arab revolts and the crisis between Qatar and the GCC show how its evolving foreign policy has been opportunistic and increasingly tactical. Although tensions with the US and the EU (whose analysis goes well beyond the scope of the present paper) still remain at work, Ankara is seen as a crucial actor to account for in several regional issues. The case of Qatar-GCC crisis in particular shows how Turkey's moves make it a central and decisive subject aspiring to the status of "middle regional power".

## **Iran**

Despite surface analysis often sustained by Western political rhetoric, Iran's Middle Eastern policy has broadly been informed to pragmatism and political realism (Barzegar and

Divsallar, 2017). The search for regional stability and a sharp concern for political, economic and military security have been overarching pillars in Iranian leadership's mindset for the past 40 years. However, Iran's foreign policy seems to be lacking a grand strategy, due to bitter political isolation, global tensions coming from the US' ongoing interference in the region. Therefore, Tehran's regional behaviour has been rather informed to political opportunism. Contrary to common sense, established around the belief that Iran's renowned revolutionary zeal pushes it to adopt an aggressive stance, its attitude is rather a defensive one. Iran's relations with the GCC and some of its smallest members is an enlightening example.

Since the GCC foundation in 1981, Iran has tried to establish cordial relations with them, extending ties to economic cooperation and in the energy sector. With Qatar in particular, bilateral relations improved around gas cooperation, by establishing the Gas exporting Countries Forum alongside with Russia. In 2014 the two countries decided to expand trade ties and create three free trade zones in the Iranian port of Bushehr and the Qatari ports of Doha and Al Ruwais (Rajabova, 2014). When some members of the GCC (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE) plus Egypt decided to form a blockade against Qatar in Summer 2017, Iran tried to take advantage of that situation by coordinating with Turkey in order to supply food, prevent any shortage resulting from the Arab blockade and lend Qatar the use of its airspace.

GCC-Qatar relations have been souring since the beginning of the Arab revolts in 2010-2011. Qatar's approach towards bottom-up movements across the region – such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – was not in line with the official Arab and GCC position. Moreover, Qatar had started to act quite autonomously within the GCC since the foundation of al Jazeera, an international, independent and state-led TV channel, proving to be defiant of Saudi Arabia and official positions taken within the GCC. As put by Aras and Yorulmazlar (2018: 5), "Qatar sought a viable and 'independent' foreign policy approach between purist models of pro-Westernism and anti-Westernism".

Although alliances in the Middle East are becoming increasingly fluid, for years Iran has been feeling squeezed from all sides by rivals and enemies, ranging from Western presence (the US, Israel) to a Western-oriented Arab bloc (Saudi Arabia, the GCC). Far from being re-integrated into the international community – given US President Trump's withdrawal from the Joint comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) deal – Iran has been building what in 2004 had been dubbed a "Shiite crescent" by King Abdullah of Jordan. Contrary to what seems to be a bunch of emerging regional "marriages of convenience" (Saudi-Israeli entente against Iran, Turkey-Russia rapprochement in Syria), Iran has forged a staunch alliance with Shia-inspired groups and movements such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the PMF in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, not to mention its long-standing strategic alliance with Bashar al-Assad's Syria. However, contrary to pro-Western and pro-Saudi political rhetoric as well, Iran's alliances go

well beyond such a Shia-inspired axis, given its long-standing penchant for Pan-Islamism and pragmatic search for strategic autonomy as the best tools to forge a winning regional strategy.

According to Sanam Vakil, “Qatar’s resources, strategic vision, unique sense of economic influence and pursuit of an independent foreign policy have enabled it to develop diverse regional relationships as a means to hedge against risk and to build ties with various groups and actors throughout the region, including the Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Iran. It has systematically and successfully balanced its relations with Saudi Arabia, the US and Iran to develop an assertive regional foreign policy” (Vakil, 2018: 12).

However, contrary to the Turkey-Qatar model – which can be defined more in terms of a durable alliance within the Western block – relations between Doha and Tehran remain opportunistic. And above all, that could not be different. Indeed, the GCC crisis carried out very interesting opportunities on both sides. While Qatar has looked for a more independent role in regional politics, by deepening its engagement with the US, EU, Russia and Turkey, Iran’s moves confirm its broad Middle Eastern approach, based on its search for resisting external pressure by trying to form the broadest alliance with non-aligned actors in the Middle East.

Geopolitical opportunism and realist search for safeguarding its independence have been prominent factors in Iran’s foreign policy since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Upon the 9/11 events, Tehran far and away benefitted from Washington’s overthrow of its rival regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran filled the void in those countries by establishing staunch alliances with local groups. Even though the rising Iranian influence in the Middle East was labelled as a “Shiite crescent”, Iran was careful to rather pursue a Pan-Islamist agenda in the region by supporting even Sunni movements like Hamas in Palestine. Such a move was opportunistic to the extent that it exploited the most symbolic issue in the Muslim world; that is the opposition to the worst enemy to Islamic masses, Israel (rhetorically dubbed the “Little Satan”).

Iran exploited the Arab uprisings mainly to endanger Saudi security and strength. Regarding the conflict in Yemen, Iran has provided Houthis with weaponry such as missiles and drones which systematically struck Saudi and UAE targets and forced the internationally recognized government of Mansour Hadi to flee, a move that prompted Riyadh to militarily intervene. In this context, the Saudi position converges with the one of Turkey and Qatar, who have been supporting the restoration of the legitimate government. In the case of Bahraini uprising, Iran did not lose the chance to back the Shia minority against the monarchy, a further move that was perceived as a deadly threat by Riyadh.

However, it is probably on the occasion of the rift between Qatar and the GCC that Saudi Arabia made the biggest mistake. By imposing an economic embargo, it made a tremendous

gift to Iran. By accusing Qatar of acting as a mouthpiece of the Muslim Brotherhood and by silencing al Jazeera, not only Riyadh further alienated Doha from its patronage, but it also silenced the most resonating voice that had fairly covered Iran's war actions in Iraq and Syria (Abdulrazaq, 2019).

Notwithstanding differences with reference to the Syrian theatre, Iran and Qatar have been able to share such other security concerns as smuggling and illegal drugs, forgery and money laundering. They signed a related security pact in 2010 (Kamrava, 2017: 176). Moreover, contrary to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, Qatar hailed the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5 + 1 (the US, Russia, China, France, Great Britain plus Germany). However, as put by Mehran Kamrava, "none of these developments is to be interpreted as signs of an emerging, long-term, strategic alliance between Iran and Qatar. Instead, each side has taken an instrumentalist approach to its relationship with the other, as evident by Hamad bin Jassim's confession to an American diplomat: 'They lie to us' he said of Qatar's relations with Iran, 'and we lie to them'" (Ibid). The most important dimension of their bilateral relation develops around cooperation in energy issues and exploitation of the large reserves of natural gas in the South Pars field. Although Qatar has historically been able to exploit its reserves more efficiently than Iran, the two countries have found it useful to avoid mutual confrontation but to foster rather pragmatic and opportunistic ties. Such a conceived relation could turn beneficial to both of them in case of rising tensions related to military issues involving competing countries in the region.

Indeed, Iran's opportunism has been evident in coming to terms with Russia in Syria. Henceforth, Iran considers Russia as an indispensable partner in the region and is increasingly looking eastward by improving its trading ties with China. All those moves suggest Iran's will to counter international isolation by pursuing a pragmatic and realist foreign policy strategy. This is particularly true in the light of President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and to the EU contradictions and weakness to upend such a nefarious outcome. Contrary to Turkey's case with Qatar, Iran does not seem to share the minimum standards to be included within the category of "middle power". Upon the Arab uprisings, Tehran has nevertheless exploited any situation to its own advantage with the aim to rise as the greatest regional power and exert an impressive clout on many groups and movements throughout the Middle East. In all likelihood, it suffers from considerable international leverage to have a say in several regional and global issues and is not seen as a crucial actor by all the main great powers.

### **Discussing categories of "middle power", "emerging regional power": the case of Turkey and Iran and the way ahead**

Two years after the air, land and naval blockade against Qatar, the situation has not clearly evolved in any direction. Meanwhile, President Donald Trump has decided to withdraw the

US from the JCPoA which was celebrated as a turning point in Western powers relations with the Iranian regime. Early on May 2019, King Salman of Saudi Arabia called for three GCC meetings in Mecca to be held on May 30 to discuss tensions with Iran and regional dynamics related to the Syrian war, the Yemeni conflict and to solve the crisis with Qatar. As of the writing, the situation seems to be more confusing than before within the GCC, with Qatar expressing reservation about the outcome of the Mecca talks, stating that it was invited too late and not consulted before (Middle East Eyes, 2019). Moreover, the Saudi leadership seems to be more and more under scrutiny, while disorder within the GCC dominate relations among its members (Hassan, 2019).

Although regional ties are becoming increasingly fluid and even if Middle East has a structural resilience to have a regional leader or hegemon, both Turkey and Iran could only benefit from this situation by stealing the final spoils of the regional competition to clearly give a response to their respective crisis. Turkey will have to find a win-win agreement with Russia in Syria. Ankara is playing its game of brinkmanship with Washington and Moscow regarding the S-400 transfer. Although several misunderstanding with US still remain, the US, the EU and NATO could not afford to deliver their historical partner to Putin; Erdogan knows that very well. Regarding Iran, the situation is yet risky but potentially favorable at the same time. Even though during the last months many rumors point to an imminent military operation against Tehran within the next six months, it is still difficult to imagine a new war in the Middle East, considering Iran's ties with Russia, the GCC internal disarray, and President Trump's first term entering his last year.

The new Turkish-Qatari military alliance, backing the Muslim Brotherhood in many cases to the GCC's distaste, can be seen as a response to the gradual US retreat from the MENA region. Even though Saudi Arabia called for the establishment of an Islamic military alliance in the Middle East, it excluded such Shia-dominated countries as Iran and Iraq (Reuters, 2015). However, rather than envisaging a grand Sunni alliance under Riyadh, it seems that Turkey and Qatar will continue to cooperate autonomously to counterbalance both the Arab bloc under the Saudi umbrella and the Shia one led by Iran (Cannon and Dorelli, 2019).

According to the above presented arguments, some hypotheses have been confirmed: a) Turkey and Iran are used to acting more like rationalist actors rather than being driven by ideology; b) consequently, the search for strategic autonomy is their respective main foreign policy goal; c) especially after the 2011 Arab uprisings, the struggle against regional (Turkey) and international (Iran) isolation entailed many different tactical responses grounded in a generally opportunistic layout in foreign policy rather than a strategic and comprehensive framework. This condition brought them to look for partners who, more or less overtly, would help them to satisfy their respective foreign policy goals.

Matching the two here presented case-studies with notable reference literature about categorizing “middle power” and “emerging regional power”, it seems that Iran and Turkey in turn represent evident cases of “emerging regional powers”. Both of them put forward a design to emerge as the solely great regional player aspiring to be the natural leader in the Middle East. Notwithstanding such an ambitious political goal, Turkey seems the only of the two that has the minimal requirements to be defined as a “middle power”, according to the definition adopted in the first paragraph: a) not only it possesses material capabilities (in terms of territory extension, population, economic resources) to be able to exert enough influence on the most important issues at the regional level and the global one; b) but it also has a say on all the most important matters at the regional level by emerging as a reliable broker, recurring to its soft power, mediating among competing interests and point of views not only among rival regional actors but also between great powers. In other terms, contrary to Iran, which by all means exerts a similar clout in the Middle East, Turkey is recognized by external great powers to be a crucial actor in solving regional disputes and an essential player they need to rely on. Turkey is so crucial even in evident cases of diverging interests with Russia and Iran in the Syrian theatre, with the EU towards the refugee deal, with the US in relation to either the Kurdish issue and the air defense system involving the purchase of S-400 from Russia and other matters. Contrary to Iran, Turkey has decisive ties with all the most important players inside the Middle East and outside and, like it or not, they have to deal with Ankara in all the most important issues. Iran is either way one of the most powerful regional powers (if not the most), capable of creating a strategic corridor to its own security which no regional power can even challenge. However, to be considered as a “middle power” that has a say even in global issues, it significantly lacks as crucial international leverage as Turkey. Of the two, while Iran can be considered a great regional power, Turkey is the only one that can be included in the category of (emerging) “middle power”, considering both its regional power status and its centrality for external actors who have an interest in Middle East dynamics and balance of power.

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## United We Stand? Measuring Threat Perceptions of Iran within the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi Axis

*Cinzia Bianco*

### Introduction

Amid the eruption of the gravest intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis in the history of the organization in June 2017 - when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, supported by Egypt, cut all relations and closed all borders with Qatar – assumptions on shared threat perceptions across the GCC, largely driving the very establishment of the body, ought to be put into questions (Bianco and Stansfield, 2018). Among other issues, the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have accused Qatar of aiding Tehran in its alleged plans of de-stabilizing the Gulf region to gain influence. While rebuking the accusations, Doha's government has given numerous indications of seeking pragmatic relations with its Iranian neighbor (Boussois, 2019). Likewise, Kuwait and Oman – officially neutral in the crisis – have been more hesitant than their fellow GCC states in characterizing Iran as a hostile power to be assertively confronted (Baabood, 2019). However, beyond a simplistic divide along the intra-GCC crisis' fault lines, reinforced in the rhetoric and narrative of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama, there are elements to argue for a more complex picture in the perceptions of Iran, with substantial differences in the anti-Qatar camp too. This is especially relevant as it pertains to divergences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two driving forces of an axis engaged in re-shaping the Middle Eastern regional order from the Gulf to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean (Hazbun, 2018). In fact this paper aims to show that the vulnerabilities and triggers for heightened security perceptions vis-à-vis Iran, revamped in the post-2011 context, have been significantly different in the two countries. In particular, historical contexts as well as demographic factors, socio-economic and socio-cultural structural features all contribute to informing country-specific perspectives on the type, intensity and dimensions of the threat perceived from Iran. In spite of a wider convergence of perspectives between the leaderships in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, these variables remain structurally irreconcilable. In the medium and long term, such disunity of perceptions cannot but heavily impact the foreign policy alignment of the two players.

## Which Kind of Threat?

### *Saudi Arabia*

There is an abundance of public and private statements from Saudi officials identifying Iran as a major threat to the Arab world and the Saudi Kingdom, especially after 2011, when uprisings had created vacuums of power to challenge the *status quo* of power dynamics in the region (al-Jubair, 2016a; al-Jubair, 2016b; Shihabi, 2016; Belbagi, 2016). However, the characterizations of such threat by Saudi officials have been divergent and even contradictory: what is, exactly, that Iran threatens? In a 2014 study, Nawaf Obaid, a long-time special counsellor to Saudi ambassadors and the Royal Court wrote that “Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as the main threat to regional stability”, with a reference to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and a special attention to the conflict Yemen (Obaid, 2014). In 2016, Prince Sultan Bin Khalid al-Faisal al-Saud, former Commander of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces Counter-Insurgency Special Operations Task Force, wrote that “serious risks and threats as a result of the pervasive and corrosive influence of Iran in our region – and in particular on Saudi Arabia – amount to a conventional threat and present a clear danger to our national security. [...] This increasing Iranian incursion into other states’ affairs directly threatens our own national security” (Al-Faisal, 2016: 24). In 2018 Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman remarked in an interview that “Iranians, they’re the cause of problems in the Middle East, but they are not a big threat to Saudi Arabia. But if you don’t watch it, it could turn into a threat” (Time, 2018). These perspectives show an oscillation between perceiving Iran as an international threat, damaging the regional interests of Saudi Arabia, and a domestic threat, intent on destabilising the Kingdom from within. Both views are often conflated in Riyadh in the idea that “since 1979, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has seen itself as facing a radical, militaristic and expansionist Iran that leverages Shi’a disenfranchisement, local power vacuums and a vast and growing network of well-armed and well-trained proxies to export its Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East” (Shihabi, 2018).

Generally speaking, the impact of historical events surrounding Iran’s Islamic Revolution on Saudi collective memory and its leadership’s perceptions, remains quite high. Many still point to when, in the 1980s, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps established the Office of Liberation Movements with the explicit purpose of supporting revolutionary groups in the Gulf, including the Organization of the Islamic Revolution (OIR) (Louër, 2008: 179). The OIR was established in 1979 by Shi’a clerics – such as Hassan al-Saffar, Tawfiq al-Saif, Jafar al-Shayeb – in the aftermath of a short-lived uprising which had spread in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province to protest poor living conditions and religious discrimination (Jones, 2006: 227-29). As this revolutionary wave faded away, from the 1990s onwards, Saudi Shi’a clerics resorted to non-violent activism (Wehrey, 2013a: 106). However, the government would

continue to raise questions about their loyalty and connections to Tehran (Ibid). When uprisings started in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in 2011, the Saudi regime saw them as a re-ignition of this past (Bianco, 2018b). While Iran's direct involvement in the uprisings remains to be proven, to a certain extent, protesters also saw these events in continuity with their past, given how the grievances lamented had not significantly changed over the decades (International Crisis Group, 2005). Saudi Shi'a – estimated at between one and a half and two million people or around 10 percent of the citizen population – have long complained of systematic, institutionalized, socio-economic inequality and socio-political marginalization (Ibid). Under the Kingdom's 1992 Basic Law, Sunni Islam is enshrined as the source of authority for the state and for the law (Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 2009). Religious edicts, fatwas, impacting all aspects of life in the Kingdom are issued by the Council of Senior Scholars, a council gathering high-profile religious scholars appointed by the King, which includes representatives of the Sunni Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafi schools, as well as Hanbalis, but no Shi'a representatives (Olsson, 2017). The Saudi education system, imbued with Wahhabi thought, long tolerated and, at times, promoted anti-Shi'ism. A lack of economic opportunities and viable employment options had relegated many areas in the oil-rich Eastern Province to socio-economic underdevelopment. Shi'a have been underrepresented in or excluded from sensitive government agencies, such as the Ministry of Interior, the National Guard, and the Ministry of Defense, police forces, the Royal Court, cabinet, diplomatic corps and governorates. Many reformist hopes had been encouraged by the accession to the throne of King Abdullah in 2005, a leader who had long sponsored initiatives aimed at tempering sectarian divisions, such as the National Dialogue, providing limited representation to the community (Thompson, 2014). However, practical outcomes from the National Dialogue lagged, and a 2009 diplomatic cable from the United States (US) consulate in Dhahran recorded the Shi'a communities in the Eastern Province as feeling socially, religiously, politically and economically discriminated against in a way that "compromised their sense of Saudi national identity" (US Consulate in Dhahran, 2009). Shi'a-regime relations had soured that year when clashes broke out between pilgrims visiting Shi'a shrines and the Baqi cemetery in Medina and members of the regime's morality police (Wehrey, 2013b). In the incidents' aftermath Shi'a cleric and former OIR leader Nimr al-Nimr gave a fiery speech, dubbed "Dignity Speech", in which he warned that secession of the Eastern Province was the only meaningful solution for the Shi'a (Ismail, 2012: 409). The connections between al-Nimr and Iran were never doubted by the Saudi regime, and when al-Nimr emerged as a moral leader to the 2011 protests in the Eastern Province, the Iran connection became predominant in the Saudi leadership's perceptions and narratives (Bianco, 2018b).

From the Saudi point of view, Iran aimed at leveraging Shi'a grievances as previously done in Lebanon and post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, where increased Iranian influence remains considered a strong threat to Saudi regional interests (Ehteshami, 2002). King Abdullah of Jordan then famously described this geopolitical belt connecting Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and

Iran under the Iranian influence as a Shi'a "crescent" (nbcNews, 2004). Thus it was certainly perceived in Riyadh, where the Syrian revolution in 2011 was initially seen as a potential opportunity to dislodge Iranian influence in Damascus, breaking the "crescent", and replacing it with Sunni forces who had pledged to pivot away from Tehran if victorious (Hassan, 2013; Solomon and Malas, 2011). For Riyadh the crescent had long resembled as a "full moon", as described by a confidant of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2016, when taking into consideration perceived Iran's ambitions in Yemen and Bahrain (The Economist, 2016). The Saudi government agreed with the Bahraini one that protests there, especially by the more active groups, were encouraged and supported by Iran, who had had ambitions over the Kingdom island since backing an attempted coup in 1981 (Alhasan, 2011). Additionally, a success of the uprising in Bahrain was perceived by the Saudi regime as a major boost for its own Shi'a opposition, in a strong domino effect, and hence a threat for the Saudi regime's survival as well as its political influence on Bahrain (Bianco, 2018b). Already in 2003, the Shia-aligned Zaydi rebel group known as Houthis had launched an insurgency against the Yemeni government, and several policy-makers in the Arabian Peninsula alleged that they were encouraged and aided by Iran (BBC, 2009). When a Houthi insurgency revamped after street protests toppled the Yemeni regime in 2011, and the group conquered large swaths of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa in 2014, Saudi Arabia launched a new military offensive, with UAE backing, renewing allegations of Iranian support (Juneau, 2016). The 2015 Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was seen through the lenses of this perceived regional expansionism by Iran. From a Saudi perspective, by lifting comprehensive economic sanctions, the agreement provided Iran with more economic resources to be re-invested in its regional proxies (Schenker, 2016). Convinced that the United States, fatigued by Middle Eastern fights, was disregarding its allies' concerns with Tehran, Saudi Arabia increasingly took the mission to counter Iran in its hands (Gause, 2014).

Externally Saudi Arabia assumed a more assertive role in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, along the lines aforementioned, and in the politics of Iraq and Lebanon. In 2017, under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia exerted pressures on Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri, leader of the Saudi-aligned Sunni formation Future Movement, to resign in protest of Iranian influence over Beirut, and offered support to Iraqi political factions, including Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in exchange for their taking the distance from Tehran (The Washington Post, 2017; Reuters, 2017). Internally, Saudi Arabia decided to hand exemplary punishments to those identified by the regime as leaders of the Saudi Shi'a revolts and, in January 2016, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was executed for terrorism alongside convicted jihadists (BBC, 2016). In response, Iranian mobs stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the general consulate in the city of Mashhad: blaming Iranian authorities of failure in protecting its diplomatic premises, Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Iran. Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir commented the decision stating: "In addition to these acts of aggression, the Iranian regime is smuggling weapons and explosives and planting

terrorist cells in the region, including the Kingdom, to spread turmoil” (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Washington D.C., 2016). In fact, in the home town of Sheikh al-Nimr, ‘Awamiyya, fighting between the security forces and small militant groups had never fully stopped between 2011 and 2017.

While balancing against perceived Iranian expansionism in the region, Riyadh also doubled down on what it saw as Iranian aggressions at home. Arguably, a comprehensive understanding of Saudi perceptions of Iran cannot but look at how the international and domestic dimensions of the threat are seen as increasingly overlapping, interconnected and fused with one another. Thus, the Saudis see the Iranian threat as what can be described a quintessentially intermestic threat, originating from abroad but having developed a strong internal dimension, threatening the regional interests of the Saudi regime as much as its internal stability.

### *The United Arab Emirates*

Compared to the dominant narrative in Saudi Arabia, the perceptions of the UAE leadership towards Iran and the threats it may pose, appear divergent in several ways. First and foremost, there is a different historical background to the bilateral relations between Abu Dhabi and Tehran. Beyond that, several variables, both at the socio-economic and the socio-political level, leave the UAE in a different position than Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis its enmity and wariness towards Iran. In Emirati strategic thinking what Iran threatens is clear-cut, and it predominantly has to do with a classic external threat.

Amid the 1979 Islamic revolution, the leadership in the UAE shared with its neighbors some concerns that Iran would encourage Emirati Shi’a to revolt against the government (UAE Abu Dhabi, 2016). When an Iranian religious leader visited Dubai right after the revolution, the authorities detained and deported him (Fort Scott Tribune, 1979). However, in spite of this and similar small incidents, the concerns were quieted when it appeared evident that the Emirati Shi’a communities were not restive against the ruling families or the state. In fact already in 1984, the revolutionary regime in Tehran even began building and financing religious institutions and charities in the UAE, including the Imam Hussein Mosque and an Iranian Hospital, for the sizable Iranian community in Dubai (Katzman, 2010). While such choices may be explained by Dubai’s rulers consistently pragmatic approach towards Iran, the loyalty of Shi’a citizens to the UAE state is not often questioned in the other Emirates too (UAE Abu Dhabi, 2016). Although statistical data from official sources is not available, Shi’a citizens are estimated to represent approximately 15 percent of the UAE’s population and live predominantly in the Northern Emirates. Thorough the years, governing authorities have pursued political strategy to provide these communities with a stake in the regime’s stability: state authorities have financed Shi'a mosques and attended Shi'a religious celebrations. While the Islamic studies curriculum is based exclusively on Sunni schools of

thought, it is not openly discriminatory against Shi'a beliefs (US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2012). Similarly to the outlook in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Shi'a do face some unofficial discrimination for positions deemed as sensitive, such as diplomatic posts or high-ranking jobs within the armed forces and state security, but in a significantly more limited way than in the other countries. In addition, the level of economic inclusiveness of the communities is, on average, high as several Shi'a families belong to the country's rich merchant elites and run some of the biggest business conglomerates in the country (UAE Abu Dhabi, 2016). Dubai businesses specifically were heavily involved into exporting and re-exporting goods with Iran, a very profitable trade and, consequently, they were greatly affected by international sanctions imposed against Iran as part of punitive measures for its nuclear programme (Kerr and Khalaf, 2010). When the Arab uprisings hit the region in 2011, the UAE authorities raised their level of scrutiny and securitization on all strata of the population. However, repression was not mainly directed at Emirati Shi'a, who did not join expressions of dissent. Rather, it was the Iranian and Lebanese diaspora to be identified as a primary Shi'a target in the UAE. In July 2013, the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee said the Emirati government had deported 500 Iranian nationals that year (Tabnak, 2013). In addition, around the same time, the UAE authorities also expelled thousands of the about 100,000 Lebanese living in the country (Naharnet, 2012). In the same context, increased vigilance was also exercised on Emirati Shi'a as they were subject to temporary restrictions, such as on hosting an international Shi'a summit (Katzman, 2010). Yet the limited nature of restrictions and the fact that monitoring activities were escalated over all national communities, once again indicated that the Emirati Shi'a community was not perceived as source of a specific threat by the leadership.

The threat was instead perceived, especially in Abu Dhabi, in Iran's regional activities. This was a decades-old theme, which arguably first emerged in the 1970s, when the Iranian Shah occupied three small but strategically located islands in the Gulf that were meant to become jointly administered by Iran and the Emirate of Sharjah, Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb (Caldwell, 1996). Arguably, however, Iran-related threat perceptions in the UAE were greatly revamped in contemporary times (Bianco, 2018a). As shown by leaked US diplomatic cables from 2009, the UAE leaders viewed Iran as a predatory power (Wikileaks, 2009). Through such lenses they perceived its nuclear ambitions, with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed describing the possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear deterrent as an instrument to become a superpower and pursue the re-establishment of "a Persian empire in the 21st century" and "emirates" in the Muslim world (Ibid). In the same conversations, the Crown Prince further stated that Iran had "emirates" equipped with financial and military resources in South Lebanon (via Hezbollah), Gaza (via Hamas) and Southern Iraq, "sleeper emirates" in Kuwait, Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and potentially another one in Northern Yemen (via the Houthis) (Ibid). It was clear from Abu Dhabi's reactions that the 2011 protests in Bahrain were perceived in this context. Already a few of days after the start of

protests in Bahrain, on 18 February 2011, the Foreign Minister of the UAE, Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, participated to a GCC meeting in Manama and expressed the country's support to the Bahraini leadership (Odinius and Kuntz, 2015: 642). A month later, Abu Dhabi was the only other GCC country beyond Saudi Arabia to commit ground forces to a Peninsula Shield operation to clear protests in Bahrain. While Saudi Arabia sent approximately 1,200 armored forces, the UAE sent around 600 police officers who actively participated in the operations and remained in the country for months (Ibid). This is a significant commitment, especially relative to that of Saudi Arabia, who had a truly vital interest in shutting down protests in Bahrain and who can count on a much larger security force. In 2015, it became even clearer to which lengths Abu Dhabi was willing to go to counter what they perceived as Iran's plans in Yemen. Amid the strengthening of relations between Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and the powerful Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman, entering Riyadh's palaces in 2015, the two countries joined forces in the most daring military operations ever conducted by either country, in Yemen (Hokayem and Roberts, 2016). The signing of the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran in July 2015 was received amid this background in Abu Dhabi, and in a close alignment with the perceptions of the Bahraini and Saudi leadership. A few months after the deal was signed, the UAE Foreign Minister al-Nahyan argued that Tehran was exploiting the good faith of the international community and the financial resources provided by the lifting of sanctions to fund destabilising activities in the region (Akbarzadeh, 2016). On the first anniversary of the JCPOA signing, the UAE Ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, wrote an article again accusing Iran of seeing the JCPOA "as an opportunity to increase hostilities in the region" (al-Otaiba, 2016). This hawkish perspective superseded more conciliatory attitudes in Dubai, Iran's most important regional trade partner and, to a certain extent, in Ras Al Khaimah, also entertaining good commercial relations with Iran (Cafiero and Hodge, 2016). Viewing Iran through a pragmatic commercial lens, Dubai officials have stated that it was in their best interest to secure their flourishing economic relations through accommodation of Iran rather than outright confrontation and the JCPOA, with the removal of international nuclear-related sanctions, was deemed useful to that purpose (Ibid). However, since having been financially bailed out by Abu Dhabi amid the 2008 global financial crisis, Dubai's independence in both economic and political matters has effectively been downsized. With wider subsidization has come more centralization, but existing divergences of interests or political positions continue to simmer below the surface.

Considering the numerous elements in the multidimensional relations between the UAE and Iran, especially in its most contemporary evolutions, unpacking the UAE leadership's security perceptions vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic is a multifaceted exercise. Taking into account the views in Abu Dhabi – the capital, the biggest and wealthiest Emirate of the Federation, in charge of foreign and security policies – and its *de facto* leader, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed, it is possible to argue that Iran is perceived as a threat, but of an almost-exclusive external nature. There is very limited concern that Iran may be challenging

the regime's stability from within the Emirates, via proxies or the local Shi'a community. The preoccupation, heightened after the Arab Spring and its aftermath, is with Iran's capability to threaten the regional interests of the UAE, which is simultaneously trying to become an emerging regional power.

### **Conclusion: The Bigger Picture**

By following the interaction at leadership level between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it would be fair to assume there has been full consensus in terms of priorities and agenda since Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman entered the royal palaces in Riyadh in 2015. His Emirati counterpart, Mohammad bin Zayed, appears to have built the UAE's entire national security strategy upon a strengthened partnership with the United States, and as close a relationship as possible with Saudi Arabia (Ibish, 2017). To push this bilateral liaison, cemented by personal contacts, into the respective institutions, the two countries have established in December 2017 a Joint Cooperation Council, facilitating political, military, economic and social coordination (The National, 2018). At the same time, as it has been here demonstrated, the two capitals' views on one of their major adversaries, Iran, are not fully in line.

The existence of an internal dimension in Saudi Arabia's perceptions of the Iranian threat inevitably impacts and constrains its calculus on confronting or engaging with Arab Shi'a in the wider region. On one hand, engaging with Shi'a leaders in Iraq, as exemplified in the 2017 meetings with Moqtada al-Sadq, can be instrumental for the regime's narrative, in dispelling the accusation of sectarianism often directed at Saudi leaders (Zeidel, 2018). On the other hand, several Iraqi Shi'a clerics are loyal to the Iranian Supreme Leader and many Saudi policy-makers are wary that further engagement with them could encourage closer, dangerous contacts with the Saudi Shi'a community (Zeidel, 2018; Bianco, 2018b). In fact, a comprehensive Saudi-Iraqi rapprochement has been held back by a Saudi prerequisite that Baghdad's ties with Iran are fully cut. On the other hand, while Abu Dhabi is also eager to offer its support to Iraq as an alternative to that of Iran, there is a greater degree of flexibility as to how to drive a wedge between the two (Aldroubi, 2018). A similar dynamic is taking shape with regards to re-engaging with the Iranian-allied regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, emerging victorious after a civil war erupted in 2011. In these years, the UAE has never endorsed or sponsored any of the Sunni opposition groups and has held a nuanced position in international conferences with regards to the possibility of Assad's involvement in Syria's political future (Ibish, 2016). In December 2018, the UAE re-opened its embassy in Damascus after months of existing contacts with Syrian regime's officials (Financial Times, 2018). On the contrary, Saudi Arabia has supported Sunni rebel groups with financial and logistical assistance as well as training since 2011 and has consistently called for Assad to leave power (Phillips, 2015; Phillips, 2017). The Syrian civil war has been central in a sectarian narrative of Shi'a violence against Sunnis, easily endorsed by Saudi media, thought

leaders, clerics, politicians and educators at a time when sectarianism was largely employed to delegitimize uprisings in the Eastern Province (Ibid). A re-engagement with the Assad regime is therefore deeply controversial for the Saudi leadership in terms of the impact it could have at the domestic level. Finally, divergences between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also extend to the sectarian factor in any exit strategy for the Yemen conflict. After more than four years of fighting, both countries are fatigued by the conflict and aim to end it in order to contain its reputational, human and financial costs (Byman, 2018). In order to end the fighting, however, compromises with the Houthis, who have not suffered a full military defeat, would seem inescapable (Knights, Pollack and Walter, 2019). The UAE, whose fighting – and interests – have been in the Houthis-free south of the country, might be willing to accept minimal compromises with regards to a role for the rebel group in Yemen's future politics to reach a solution to the conflict (Note 1). Saudi Arabia, instead, has consistently insisted that their absolute priority is to prevent the emergence of “another Hezbollah” on their borders (Shihabi, 2018).

Taking into consideration these reflections, it can be argued that, notwithstanding the mentioned unifying factors and forces, the explored misalignment of perceptions emerges clearly when analyzing the Shi'a policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially on countries invested by sectarian conflicts. Among the two, the small country with vast resources and a cohesive, quiescent national fabric is undoubtedly less constrained in its foreign adventures than the large country, with less resources in relative terms, and a divided nation, polarized from within.

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## Notes

Note 1. Already in 2018, an Emirati general told a tribal leader from Bayda that the Houthi rebels "are no longer our priorities or biggest enemy" (Abdul-Ahad, 2018). A similar point was made by an official at the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs interviewed by the author (Bianco, 2018a).

## Roundtable Report – The Future of the GCC in a Troubled Region

The roundtable brought together the speakers of the IMEIS Annual Conference 2019 as well as other colleagues from the School of Government and International Affairs (SGIA) to reflect on the past and future prospects of the GCC. The discussions – chaired by Prof. Anoush Ehteshami – unpacked a number of subjects previously raised during presentations. The speakers were invited to debate around topics such as; the prospects of the GCC, whether the organization is driven by economy, security or institutionalism, the comparison between the European Union and the GCC, how the legality of interstate relations is eroding among the GCC members, and exposition of the GCC to external forces. While those problematics are highly relevant to the future of the GCC, they arise from ongoing concerns about the current and future prospects of regional organization inside and outside the Middle Eastern region.

Discussants: Dr. Tahani Al-Terkait (al-Sabah Programme, Durham University), Dr. Abdullah Baabood (Singapore National University), Cinzia Bianco (University of Exeter), Prof. Anoush Ehteshami (Durham University), Noha Ezzat (Durham University), Dr. Alberto Gasparetto (University of Padua), Dr. Gertjan Hoetjes (Durham University), Prof. Clive Jones (Durham University), Dr. Máté Szalai (Corvinus University of Budapest).

Participants: Dr. Diana Galeeva (Durham University), Dr. Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani (Durham University), Kazuto Matsuda (University of Edinburgh), Jacopo Scita (Durham University), Dan Wang (Durham University).

### Question 1: Will anybody miss the GCC?

**Clive Jones:** The GCC is purely a husk and even worse than that. Abdullah Baabood eluded to the idea that there were some successes. I would even question that there were successes. You talked, for example, about the idea of the customs union, the idea of people being able to work across borders and boundaries. That, actually, has not happened. Consider how many Qataris work in Oman, how many Omanis work in Kuwait, how many Saudis work in Bahrain, etc. So, I do not think that, even within the idea of the customs union and the free flow of goods and services and indeed of people, that actually happened. Why? Because ultimately, if you are comparing to the European Union (EU), what you are

looking at is a process, and this is an incremental process, the one of democratization. The GCC simply does not have the structures to develop these notions of institutions without a process of democratization. So, I actually think in that regard that the GCC is failed even on the economic sense. Security is clearly failed, and indeed, I am trying to increase my sales, I am about to publish a book (Note 1) that actually looks at the relationships between Israel and Gulf monarchies. In this book, we put forward the idea that the real security regime is the Middle East, and there is a tacit security regime between a number of actors, including between the Israelis, the Emiratis, the Saudis and the Bahrainis in particular. But in essence, I think we are beginning to see a fragmentation, if there is a war that topples the security regimes or the GCC. In that regard, the GCC has always been what is it, it has been exposed for what it is: a husk.

**Abdullah Baabood:** I will miss the GCC. I agree with Clive Jones. What I tried to mention earlier is that there have been some limited successes, but there are also problems with the agreements in terms of implementation. There is a lack of a legal system of enforcement, a body or an institution. The GCC leaders at the Supreme Council approve a treaty/agreement but when it comes to implementing it at a state level, there are issues. No one can take a record and ask why the treaty has not been implemented. So, certainly, there is a lack in terms of institutions that can enforce this. Those difficulties sometimes do not arise from the state itself, but from bureaucracy and administration. Each decision has to go through the filters of law and democracy tools, through the line of persons who sit at the customs. It takes time. It took time in Europe as well. I suffered a lot because of this as well at the personal level. I was trying to drive my car from Qatar to Oman and it was a nightmare, while we have a customs union. I even kept twitting about it. I paid customs everywhere, to each country. I had to buy insurance to each country as I was driving. From Doha to Dubai, it took me almost 24 hours' drive, while both locations are actually less than six hours drive apart from each other. This was a nightmare. However, I can actually go and work in Qatar for example. I do not need a visa, I travel with my ID card. People can go and invest. There are small things that have worked. So, I do not think that we should disregard the achievements of the GCC, although I am critical of it. Yet, there is a number of achievements we can actually build on. And as I said, beyond the agreements themselves, a lot of smaller things are taking place: cooperation in terms of banking, education, curriculum harmonization, etc. Several things in all different sectors are taking place. Is it tedious? Yes. Is it slow? Absolutely. Is it below expectations? Yes, I totally agree. But I do not think that we should disregard it and say that nothing has been done. I think that we will miss it. I hope that it does not go away in a way that it will dismantle everything and break what is here already to build something else. I think that we should build on what is here already and improve what we have got. If you look at the intra-trade, certainly, investment has grown by hundreds of percentages point. I admit it grew from a very low level, but still it has grown thanks to these agreements that have taken place. I think we should now start thinking about where it is going.

**Máté Szalai:** My comment would be as much as a new question than an answer. From my point of view, one of the biggest advantages of the GCC, or one of the biggest accomplishments of the GCC, is to create a forum to exchange perceptions, threat perceptions for example. We know that these threat perceptions have been different ever since the creation of the GCC. Even if Iran and Iraq used to be considered as threats towards GCC countries, the nature of the threat or the extend of these threats was always different. One of the primary functions of the GCC was to exchange these threat perceptions between the member states. I think that this is a value in itself and this value is basically running to an end. This is a huge problem, and this is why I would miss the GCC.

**Tahani Al-Terkait:** I think that I will miss the GCC to a great extent. I believe that, rhetorically, the GCC united the people. There is this sense that we are one community. When the blockade happened, the people were more united than the governments, and this is important. One of the first stories that came to the press was about what would happen to the Qataris living in the UAE, and people were very emotional. The inter-marriages that happened between the Gulfi states affected families. As a citizen of the Gulf, I would say that, I think this is a privilege that I will not lose my social insurance if I move and work to any Gulf state. This is one of the privileges that I can still use as a citizen of the Gulf. Listening to Prof. Clive Jones leads me to another question. There is a comparison between the EU and the GCC. Can we really compare the two institutions? Even when we look at the government system of the GCC, there are mainly monarchies with a hereditary system. I do not think that we can compare it to the EU. It does not make it a successful product of the Peninsula, but as Dr. Baabood said, there are small changes and progresses and at the same time, it is uniting the people. I think that this crisis is more of a test, an examination of whether it can survive or not. Personally, even if in a few months from now, there will not be a GCC anymore, I think that in the long run, there will be something else, an alternative for a collective power in the region. Another thing that came to my mind after listening to everybody today: I think we need to look into small states in the region such as Kuwait – Bahrain probably is a very different case – and Qatar. Qatar and Kuwait, as small states, need this collective organization. I do not think we can act independently without an umbrella.

**Gertjan Hoetjes:** I think that the nature of the Gulf Cooperation Council has changed over time. In the 1980s, the focus was very much on internal security and also security coordination between the member states in terms of protecting themselves against the threat of revolutionary Iran, also exchanging information which still happens today. Moreover, in terms of strategies, the GCC was concerned with the question: how to deal with opposition within the different member states? Then, after the Iraq invasion, there was this pressure towards imposing more liberal regimes within the member states of the GCC. Then came different projects in terms of an economic union and the establishment of a common market. Those projects were instrumental and fostered what Abdullah Baabood

referred on, that is, how transnational capital has come together, how members states of the GCC have been investing in different Gulf countries, but also how they have invested in North Africa and Egypt. And maybe one could even argue that, in that sense, the role that has been played by Saudi Arabia and Qatar outside of the Gulf region asserts them in the broader region – in North Africa – and might be fostered by the protest initiated within the GCC.

**Diana Galeeva:** The GCC will be missed if it collapses but I do not believe this will happen. The GCC case really helps us, scholars reconsider existing theories in international relations theory. Examples of this are recent historical events in the Middle East, particularly the Arab Spring which has contributed to the academic discussion of the role of small states. A changing political environment – such as the emerging vacuum in the Middle East due to the decreasing regional roles of traditional leaders Iraq, Egypt, and Syria – and the active positions of the small GCC states, has led to debate among scholars to more clearly identify the terms “weak” and “strong” in the region. Even if I do not believe that the GCC as an organization will collapse, it is difficult to find or predict circumstances which might assist a reunion of the states, through overcoming the ongoing Gulf Crisis 2017, for example. What is missing in this union is that there are no values that connect these states together. Dr. Tahani Alterkate mentioned the case of the European Union, I also wanted to comment on it. In the EU there are some values that connect the states together, such as democracy and liberal values. At the beginning of the Gulf Crisis 2017, I published an article arguing that only the *khaliji* identity might assist in uniting all states, and help overcome the current Crisis. However, we now see, after two years, that it did not help. Other factors that historically united states also failed to reunite GCC members. For example, one of the reasons the GCC was established was because of the Iranian threat. However, perceptions of the Iranian threat nowadays vary between the GCC states. This means that threat perception does not unite GCC states anymore. There is currently no similar value or principal that fosters cooperation and unites different perceptions of contemporary issues. That is why I see that it will take a long time for these states to become united again and overcome the current Gulf Crisis.

**Jacopo Scita:** Last year, I interviewed Professor Giacomo Luciani and I asked him the same question (Note 2). What he said is that he sees an interest in the GCC in a sort of shared political and economic supra-national dimension. But what he argued is that the threats to the unity of the GCC, and especially to its survival, are external. The GCC is facing a sort of severe regional war which is disrupting the Gulf. For example, what is going on with Iran, in Syria, and in Yemen and all the region is what is really pushing the GCC and creating tensions within it. It is not something coming from inside. Especially, Prof. Luciani mentioned that he perceived the political and economic elites as very interested in keeping this idea of the GCC alive and cooperate further. But this is an external threat, or multiple external threats, that loom.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Jacopo Scita's argument): This is ironic because 38 years ago, they set up the GCC precisely to cope with the external threats that were perceived to be out there. And yet, that dynamic has changed completely and the GCC has not been able to maintain its cohesion.

**Clive Jones:** Let me just add about this piece on the European Union. The EU, ultimately, has a sense of horizontal security, it embraces all forms of securities: human security, social security, society security and so on and so forth. I take on board everything that has been said by Tahani Al-Terkait and Abdullah Baabood but, at the end of the day, those are small things and those things may grow. But ultimately, you are dealing with an organization that has a very hierarchical sense of security. Someone earlier today talked about the dominance Saudi Arabia has. You are really going to have a collective sense of security – the very notion of a security complex in collective, that deals with that security complex – if the states of the region are willing to pull sovereignty. That is absolutely no ever thing at all that any of the GCC state is willing to do that.

**Anoush Ehteshami:** Imagine the impossible: when you look around the world, very few regional organizations formally died. They become irrelevant or they kind of loose their *raison d'être*. The Maghreb Union, the Arab League, the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) are good examples of this. The ACC existed for one year and folded because there was nobody left. So, there is no precedent for ending a regional grouping. The only one we could arguably say that it formally ended was the Soviet Union, but that was not a regional union – it was an empire in many ways. Were the GCC to fold, how do you think it might happen? Abdullah Baabood eluded to its institutional lock head at the same time as these layers of cooperation and integration continuing and being respected. To this day, the Secretariat functions in Riyadh, the Qatari representation is still taking place while there is no customs union between Qatar and the rest. These things are still carried on in Riyadh at a lower level. Who will eventually say; enough is enough and I am leaving? How will the GCC move on – I do not want to use the term “evolve” – from that kind of a rupture? Post-GCC as it is now are opportunities. Back in 1991, we had a different 6+2 – GCC + Egypt + Syria – and this morning we spoke about the monarchies 6+2. These are just two modalities down more than 30 years' experience.

*Question 2: What will happen to a GCC where one or more of its member states decides to leave in the way Qatar left the oil Consortium?*

**Abdullah Baabood:** I would like to add something very quickly about the relation between the EU and the GCC, which also relates to your question. Yes, we do not share the same values as the EU does such as democracy and human rights, etc. But we do share some values: the security of the regimes, the security of the monarchies and of the royal families,

repression, lack of human rights. There are certain values, from a different perspective, that are shared between those countries and that keeps them together. I was once sitting with the Secretary General of the GCC and he was saying to me; “You know what Abdullah, we are much more integrated than the EU!” They actually believe that, from their perspective, they are much more integrated than the EU. That is the way they look at things. I do not think anyone wants to kill the baby, no one wants to throw the baby with the bath water. Everyone wants to keep the GCC, despite all the troubles. I asked the Foreign Minister of Qatar; “You know, giving what is going on, what do not you leave the GCC?” He said; “No, we are not going to leave it. If anybody wants to leave, they can but we are not going to leave it”. I do not think that Oman is going to leave, I do not think that the Emirates are going to leave. I think it will either revive in one way, or it will fizzle out slowly and it will become very dormant, but I do not think that anybody wants to be responsible for breaking it. The only country that can do that without bearing the criticism is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is building a reward tactics: it rewarded the Emirates signing a cooperation tax treaty with them. It also signed one with Kuwait and tried to signal the same to Oman and Qatar. These cooperation agreements – their timing is very interesting – are not necessarily something similar to the EU where we have different “speed EU” or variable geometries where integration takes place. These cooperation agreements are designed to entice other countries and convince them that they have to be close and benefit Saudi Arabia. I think that the problem with the GCC is Saudi Arabia. There is no other way. Of course, the other countries have smaller problems, but the big problem is from Saudi Arabia because this country does not really recognize that other member states should even exist. If it was not for the British, they would have taken the whole region. Saudi Arabia is a very powerful and large country and it will only use surrounding small insignificant countries if/when it is needed, when it has something to win. That is what is happening now with the relationship with Qatar. Can we change the mind of the Saudis? I have tried but I have given up. I do not think one can change the Saudis’ mind. That is the way they will always look at the region. Even the GCC – as the way it is now – is going to be problematic. The GCC has to evolve into something different. Even if the member states become democracies, again the Saudi weight will be overwhelming. Even if the charter is changed, it will still be a problem. We need to bring other players in.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Abdullah Baabood’s argument): That is really interesting, because looking at configuration, you can still have an Arab sub-regional organization that would keep some of the concerns of the Saudis about Iran in particular out of this and would facilitate membership of a country like Iraq. But given that the balance of power in Iraq has changed, it has been disunited if you like, that raises a new set of questions about how does the GCC evolves beyond this.

**Cinzia Bianco**: To answer Anoush Ehteshami’s question, I agree with Dr. Baabood. If there is any player that would dissolve the GCC, it is Saudi Arabia under King Mohammed bin

Salman, if he becomes king. This connects me to your previous question: who would miss the GCC? When/if there is the next crisis with Qatar, what is going to happen? As we know the military escalation was not stopped by the GCC but by the United States. On a different level, I think that the existence of the GCC did serve to tune it down. That is very hypothetical and that is a speculation, but my point is, if you destroy the GCC, what happens when the next crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia erupts for instance? That also connects me to one of the major differences between the GCC and the EU which is that not only the balance of power in the EU at its foundation was more balanced to a certain extent – countries such as France and Germany were comparable – certainly this balance is not as pronounced between Saudi Arabia and other smaller GCC member states. That is a structural issue. There is also the issue that the founding rationale was that, in Europe, establishing a form of regional organization was considered to be the only way for us to stop killing one another. We have to say that out loud, that was the initial idea. The real threat that we were trying to contain came from within Europe itself. That is completely different than the rationale to establish the GCC which is to unite against an external player considered as a threat. That is also an issue of economic integration – which for the EU is the ultimate way to ensure that we do not fight with one another – that is only present in Brussels; integrate economically and you will become interdependent and that will make it very difficult for conflict to erupt. That was the opposite in the GCC where the customs union was actually used against Qatar. The integration was weaponized. That is another difference.

**Gertjan Hoetjes:** If the GCC would dissolve, it would enhance the power of Saudi Arabia against the smaller GCC states, and draw external power within the Gulf region as the smaller Gulf states are trying to counter balance further against Saudi Arabia influence and pressure. Also, those smaller states do not have a multilateral forum like to GCC to address those issues with Saudi Arabia and form together a common front against the Saudi domination within the region.

**Noha Ezzat:** I think that what is happening now can give us a clue about what might happen if the GCC is dismantled or becomes completely useless. We are going to see a sort of unilateral tie between the Saudis and the Emiratis, and probably with the Bahrainis. As it is already happening now, the GCC is being rendered useless by its most key states. I think that this goes back to what Prof. Jones was saying. Dr. Tahani and Dr. Baabood were talking about logistical conveniences that were achieved by the GCC but those do not really amount to what Prof. Clive was talking about, which is the GCC as an institutional accomplishment. The GCC does not exist as an institutional accomplishment, which raises questions about how the integration mechanisms that were achieved were easily appropriated by one country against the others. This would never happen in the EU because this poses the question of whether a regional system can be achieved by a state that itself, independently, does not have a strong institutional character. The European states have very old

established states, they have infrastructure power in their societies and the regional system they achieved was an independent project to create a regional or a global power. But the GCC was established mainly to face a threat by a group of actually very fragile rentier states, which explains the volatility of how the GCC easily moves around and becomes the tool of Saudi Arabia and then becomes the tool of the Emiratis at another point. If the GCC exists in any way, it does so only for those who enjoy the logistical conveniences, for the citizens traveling or those saving the headache of a customs. It does not exist as a solid institutional project in the region and only gets its voice heard by the fact that its surrounding is underdeveloped. If the GCC was in South-East Asia, no one would care. Part of the resilience of the GCC is that it is a nod of rentier states in a region that is otherwise underdeveloped.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Noha Ezzat's argument): That is very true, but it does have cultural empathy, much more than the EU or the ASEAN or any other regional organization. Actually, when you travel across the GCC, music, food, cinema, radio, literature are all shared. That separates them from the rest of the Arab world. Irrespective of existing differences, I think that what Dr. Tahani and Abdullah were saying is that, at a social-cultural level, there is a huge amount of harmony across the region. Surely that is a source of stability for the groups of community of states.

**Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani**: As pointed out by several speakers, a big challenge to the effectiveness of the GCC is Saudi Arabia. Smaller states are concerned about their sovereignty. Saudi Arabia acts like a father letting his sons have their independence, and yet, it uses different instruments to limit that independence and sovereignty. The "sons" either have to bandwagon or to resist and pay a heavy price. However, if we put ourselves in the shoes of smaller states and look for a solution to help the GCC to be more effective – in that case, smaller states would be independent from Saudi Arabia – probably, one of the feasible options is to integrate Iran, Iraq and Turkey. As for Iraq, because of its current challenges, it would not be a heavy actor as opposed to Iran and Turkey. Those two can balance Saudi Arabia. If it integrates more actors, the GCC would have more options economically, in terms of trade and other aspects. Moreover, there would be more possibilities, or it would be more feasible to contain Iran within a regional community rather than letting it go wild.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani's argument): So, do you compromise the monarchical nature of these states? It would end the GCC as a community of Gulf monarchies to bring two heavy weight republican states into it. That would do exactly what the smaller states do not want to happen. I think they worry about that more than they do about Saudi Arabia. The key question that keeps coming out from all of the discussions is that actually the regimes' security and the nature of regimes' integrity are the driver of their role perception. Bringing the two big republics that are not even Arab republics ... so, they have to find different kinds of solutions. But a remodeled GCC would allow cooperation between these other actors.

**Gertjan Hoetjes:** We made a comparison between the EU and the GCC and one obvious difference is the low level of institutionalization in the GCC. How can we expect the GCC to achieve a higher level of institutionalization while the nation states who founded the GCC have a very low level of institutionalization on the nation-state level, with the absence of the rule of law, the lack of accountability and transparency? As long as nothing changes at the nation-state level in terms of adjusting and transforming this low level of institutionalization, nothing will happen at a higher regional level. So, therefore, I think that the prospects for the GCC to transform are very bleak.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Gertjan Hoetjes's argument): Assumed that they want to transform of course. One of the dangers of comparison with the EU is the assumption that it wants to evolve. You could argue, as Dr. Baabood was implying this morning, that actually, customs union and those are accidents of integration rather than desirable process of change. They can decide that they tested the integration, it was not successful, and they should go back instead. Nothing stops the GCC to take a step back and decide that actually minimum integration is what will save the GCC rather than maximum one. So, forget the EU model, let's have a model of interstates relations under an umbrella. That would be the end product. It is erroneous to assume that the GCC will be evolved along the model of the EU.

**Clive Jones** (reacting to Anoush Ehteshami's argument): But here is a difference between what is desirable and what is possible. Building on Gertjan's points, if you do not have the institutional maturity to develop, you cannot anyway. The point here is that the GCC is always bounded by its lack of institutional development, and why? Because ultimately, we are looking at autocratic states that have not allowed those independent institutions to evolve, which has been the basis for the growth of the EU.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Clive Jones's argument): Very true. But when we did an EU, we got Brexit Britain. So, there is a spectrum in all of those levels of integration that maybe the GCC's foretelling what might come after.

**Clive Jones:** But at least, in the case of the EU, people had the choice.

**Diana Galeeva:** I think that the GCC will continue to exist as an organization, and that none of its members will leave the union. Though, the question definitely is about interaction between them. For now, because of the Gulf crisis, there is not much interaction between all of them. The Gulf Crisis affected the trust between members, and it will be difficult for the states to return this trust for many years to come. If we speak about the possibility of inviting other states to the union, I do not think it will happen. If some of the GCC states and other non-GCC states' political interests are similar, they will unite with them anyway. For example, nowadays during the Gulf Crisis, Egypt is the one of the states deemed part of the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet, with the other GCC states Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. This 'Anti-Terror Quartet' boycotted or blockaded' another GCC member, Qatar.

Question 3: In your view, who will suffer most from the collapse of the GCC?

**Cinzia Bianco:** I think Kuwait would suffer the most because that is certainly what they have been pursuing: saving the GCC as a way of insuring their own domestic stability. Kuwait is a diverse society that socio-politically suffers from the consequences of regional instability and, like it has been the case numerous times in the past. Therefore, any tension or strong political conflict in the region tends to have internal repercussions and to rip out the national fabric and the political stability of Kuwait.

**Noha Ezzat:** I agree that Kuwait would suffer the most. Theoretically, Kuwait and Qatar and Oman are the three states that are going to be effectively sidelined by the Bahrainis, Saudis and Emiratis if there a break of the GCC. But what makes the Omanis and Qataris safer is that, in recent years, in responding to challenges, they have taken bold unilateral initiatives to secure themselves. The Omanis have long-standing relations with Britain, as well as their own independent policies. The Qataris as well, somehow, enjoy good relations with the American establishment, which refused to join the blockade eventually, and they now have good relations with Turkey. Kuwait is the country that has been trying to be neutral and mediate but still shies away from crossing Saudi Arabia's red lines and taking bold unilateral decisions. They will probably have to do this to secure themselves in a post-GCC age.

**Abdullah Baabood:** I would like to bring another dimension to this. Yes, I can see Kuwait suffering from it. Kuwait is also the country that proposed the GCC the way it is, so it has a kind of moral commitment to the organization. But if you ask the Secretary General of the GCC; "which is the country the most keen on cooperating and integrating", you would get an answer that you would probably not believe: Oman. Although Omanis are against the union and the common currency – and they have good reasons for it – the country is very keen to keep the GCC, partly for economic reasons. Oman cannot not exist economically without the GCC. It would really suffer. Again, if you take it to another dimension, I think Saudi Arabia as well will miss the GCC. Saudi Arabia uses the GCC for its own benefit, it gives it another level of political dimension of power within the Arab League and within the Organization of Islamic Conference. Wherever it goes within the UN, Saudi Arabia can pass on so many things under the umbrella of the GCC and hide behind the GCC for certain policies. This is why nobody wants to touch it despite the fact that it is almost on its death bed, but nobody wants to pull the plug out.

**Máté Szalai:** I wanted to quickly highlight the case of Bahrain. This is my opinion, I think that for Bahrain, the strategic challenge is not only Iran and the Iranian influence but also its exposure to Saudi Arabia both in terms of security and economic relations. This exposure did not really help Bahrain's stability. I would not say that the securitization narrative in Bahrain can only be attributed to the Saudi influence, but the current collapse of the GCC

led to more exposure of Bahrain to the Saudi security narrative and this harms the Bahraini domestic policies to a great extent. That is why I would say that, even if the Bahraini regime does not want to see this, it is a huge problem for Bahrain.

*Question 4: Which of these external actors will miss the GCC most: Turkey, Israel, United States, European Union, Russian Federation, China, and the Arab League?*

**Máté Szalai:** I think the EU will because the other states prefer doing business on the bilateral level. It is in the EU's mindset to tackle the whole region stability.

**Abdullah Baabood:** It depends on how you look at the question. All actors will miss it for different reasons. I will start with the EU because the EU is a product of regional integration and it likes to encourage other regional integrations. This is why it started trying to help the GCC people to move forward with their procedures in terms of customs and the Free Trade Association (FTA). The EU does not want to see regional integration go down. But I think that the US will miss the GCC for security reasons. The US found that, if it can work through the GCC and integrate the systems within the GCC – especially when it comes to security – it is much better. Of course, the US is trying to sell arms and it is easier to do so if the GCC is one system that is supplied by the US instead of the Russian or the Chinese, or anybody else. Turkey is not going to miss the GCC, Israel neither.

**Cinzia Bianco:** We need to think about Israel. If the dissolution of the GCC triggers a rapprochement between Qatar and Iran, Israel might prefer to have the smaller countries under the umbrella or the strong influence of Saudi Arabia, provided that Saudi Arabia is on board. Having Saudi Arabia on one's side and being confident about that, allows Saudi Arabia to influence the others small states in a way that is preferable than the smaller countries being closer to other more threatening players.

**Clive Jones:** It was never Israel's foreign policy to want to do with multilateral organization and will never be. Look at the ties it created with the Emiratis, the Saudis and the Bahrainis. They see actually a collective GCC approach as detrimental to their security interests across the Gulf so, I disagree with Cinzia Bianco.

**Tahani Al-Terkait:** China. With the project of the silk road and the with the trade, I think that China will be affected business wise.

**Alberto Gasparetto:** I do not want to be biased but I would choose Israel as well, and the US also, because in their perspectives, they have always treated the GCC as a counterbalance of Iran. From a threat perceptions perspective, I would choose those two actors. To add something to the previous questions, if Cinzia Bianco was right in her first intervention, and I think she was right when highlighting the differences between the EU and the GCC in that

the GCC was created for counterbalancing an external threat while the EU was created to cooperate in order to tackle any threat emerging in the future – how about considering the GCC as more comparable to the NATO organization?

**Noha Ezzat:** I agree with Cinzia Bianco that Israel would miss the GCC the most. As prof. Clive Jones said, Israel does not prefer to deal with the GCC. The Israelis will continue to deal bilaterally with the Saudis, the Emiratis and the Bahrainis even more intensely. But they would suffer from the repercussions of the absence of the GCC. They would suffer from any instability that would happen in Kuwait and from any nationalist position that the Omanis or the Kuwaitis might adopt giving that they would be free from the Saudi-Emirati consensus. The presence of the GCC as a tool of the Saudis and the Emiratis is fruitful for the Israelis.

**Kazuto Matsuda:** It was not in the list, but I think that Japan will suffer from the absence of the GCC. Japan is trying to advance FTA with the GCC and to expand the level of cooperation with the GCC, and therefore with the Gulf region. Japan is also trying to play a role as a mediator in the crisis in the Gulf region, where the US is on the Saudi side and Russia is on the Iranian side. There would also be a regional security crisis if the GCC comes to disappear. Moreover, Japan, as well as south-east Asian countries, imports a large volume of hydrocarbons from the GCC countries.

**Dan Wang:** I think China is definitely not the one who is going to miss the GCC, but it will miss it eventually. As we all know, the typical Chinese stand on the problems happening in this part of the world is to say: “Let the Arabs do the Arab things, let the GCC deal with its own things in its own way”. If the GCC disappears, China will lose one useful tool or an excuse to escape its responsibilities in the Gulf region. In that sense, China will miss the GCC.

**Tahani Al-Terkait:** I just want to talk about one thing. I do not think that the six members of the GCC are fully independent from the GCC as a council. Each country is independent with full sovereignty, and they are acting unilaterally when it comes to their relationships with other states, in diplomatic matters, and so on. They rely on the GCC collectively when there is a crisis – although the Gulf crisis is not a good example of that. If there is a threat, such as the invasion of Kuwait, the GCC has a role. Nobody is going to lose anything. Each state has its own policies and tactics. But sometimes, they go back to the regional power, which is under the umbrella of the GCC.

**Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani:** If everybody will miss the GCC and if nobody wants to leave it, what are we even talking about this?

**Anoush Ehteshami** (answering the Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani’s comment): Except that it is in crisis, this is why we talk about it.

**Gertjan Hoetjes:** Is there any other actor beside the European Union who was ever engaged with the GCC? I think that all the other nation states that were mentioned in the list have always been operating on a bilateral level.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (reacting to Gertjan Hoetjes's argument): Not true, China and the US have both been looking at the GCC as a partner.

**Gertjan Hoetjes** (answering Anoush Ehteshami): But at the same time, the US has undercut the GCC by signing bilateral free trade agreements with Bahrain and Oman.

**Anoush Ehteshami** (answering to Gertjan Hoetjes): Yes, that was to undermine the EU more than anything else. This is interesting that Russia did not come up. I was wondering, how could we look at Russia's position with regard to the GCC? I do not see a clear strategy myself in how Russia is analyzing this.

**Diana Galeeva:** Russia has developed bilateral relations with each member of the GCC rather than engage in a dialogue with the institution itself. Between 2000 and 2010 there was differentiation between Saudi Arabia and "other small states". When Putin came to power in the 2000s, Russia took the first step towards the Muslim world by joining the Organization of Islamic Cooperation through Saudi Arabia. The events of 9/11 assisted Russia in building further relations with Saudi Arabia; Saudi leadership showed interest in buying Russian weapons, while energy cooperation was developed as well. Though the importance of other small GCC states was considerable due to their financial resources, so too, economic and military contracts were signed. After the Arab Spring, it seems Russia further developed relations with each member of the GCC. Qatar has become one of the biggest foreign investors in Russia. But there has been significant political conflict of interest between Russia and Qatar after the Arab Spring, including Russia's support for the al-Assad regime in the Syrian War, while Qatar supported Islamists groups such as al-Nusra Front. Since 2015, Russia has contacts with *Haftar* in Libya, which provides tactic diplomatic cooperation with the UAE, and to an extent, Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the leadership of republics with Muslim populations in Russia also developed bilateral relations with GCC members. These include President of Chechnya Kadyrov's, and President of Tatarstan Minnikhanov's meetings with the Emiratis, Saudis, and Bahrainis, while the former leader of Ingushetia, Evkurov, met occasionally with the Qataris. My conclusion is that the GCC as an institution is probably not very important to Russia, but all six members states are, and so relations will continue between them.

**Anoush Ehteshami:** So, there is, from what you say, hope for the Chinese Muslims because China will begin to realize the importance of a large Muslim community as soft power rather than as an illegitimate presence in the country. That may happen if they begin to see that there is actually value in such a policy. My hope is that they will begin changing their perception but that is for another century perhaps, not this one.

## Notes

Note 1. Jones, C. and Guzansky, Y. (Eds.) (forthcoming, December 2019). *Fraternal Enemies. Israel and the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst Publishers.

Note 2. Scita, J. (2019). 'Il Rentier State. Intervista a Giacomo Luciani', in G. Bottos, F. Rustichelli, F. Salesio Schiavi, J. Scita and G. Sirtori (Eds.), *Il Trono di Sabbia. Stato, nazioni e potere in Medio Oriente* [In Italian]. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, pp. 31-48.

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## **About the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS)**

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