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GULF DIPLOMATIC MEDIATION IN THE POLITICAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

As the turmoil across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) enters its fifth year, the role of Gulf countries in influencing the processes of change in the MENA region has evolved substantially. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Qatar have all developed assertive regional policies towards states in political transition and supported fellow monarchical regimes in Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, and Morocco. These policies have been crafted against the backdrop of rising uncertainty about the future role of the United States in the Middle East as the Obama administration „pivots toward Asia“, and deeper shifts in the structure and balance of geo-economic power. New approaches to issues of global governance are altering the parameters of engagement and multilateral cooperation as Gulf actors become further embedded in inter-governmental frameworks.

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INTRODUCTION

Funding and development agencies in the Gulf have long records of providing aid and assistance to the wider region, rooted in Islamic principles of charitable giving as well as humanitarian principles more

generally. What has changed since the start of the Arab uprisings is that Gulf States' regional and foreign policy has become more assertive and overtly connected with attempts to influence, if not control, the pace and direction of change in transition states. Greater understanding among policy-makers of the differences of approach will assist officials in identifying avenues of practical cooperation. These will be more likely to succeed along issue-specific lines, such as participation in international working groups (on Syria or Yemen, for example) that can pool resources from a diverse range of actors in pursuit of a common (and manageable) objective.

Leveraging Gulf support in this manner can form the basis for the subsequent expansion of multilateral cooperation by enhancing the familiarity and trust of all stakeholders as attention turns to the intricate – and long-term – challenges of stabilisation in MENA states. Toward this objective, this working paper examines how the Gulf Cooperation Council is creating new and more organized inter- and intra-regional linkages. It explores how these new ties are helping to manage the crisis and reshaping the international relations of the MENA through financial and energy resources both to fund and participate in international institutions and to steer the direction and pace of political and economic transitions in the Arab world.

GCC FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF DISPUTES

A decade later, the foundation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 constituted the first formal step towards the creation of a constellation of sub-regional institutional fora, to be followed in 1989 by the Arab Maghrebi Union and by the Arab Cooperation Council.

The process which led to the creation of the GCC is in many respects poles apart from the conditions that brought about the Arab League at the end of World War II. Common strategic and ideological worries, rather than a long-term project of unification, brought the oil-rich dynastic kingdoms of the Gulf together in the mid-1970s, when they began fearing the regional ambitions of Iran and Iraq after they (temporarily) settled their dispute on the Shatt-el-Arab¹. As the leaders of the 1979–80 Islamic Revolution in Iran called for the spread of revolution in the region, these

¹ R. K. Ramazani, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Record and Analysis*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988, p. 4.

plans received a drastic acceleration², which resulted in signing of the GCC Charter in Abu Dhabi on 26 May 1981 by the heads of state of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman.

The GCC was initially conceived as little more than a forum for policy coordination. Its institutional structure bears strong resemblances with the European Union³. Its core organs are two inter- governmental bodies – the Supreme Council (which comprises the six heads of state and is convened once a year) and the Ministerial Council (reminiscent of the EU’s Council of Ministers, which comprises the six foreign ministers and meets every three months) – and are supplemented by a Secretariat, based in Riyadh, which coordinates these activities and oversees the implementation of the GCC policies⁴.

This institutional structure also reveals that the GCC has been conceived as an inherently functionalist cooperation project. The Charter refers to “economic and financial affairs” as the first area of cooperation but fails to mention coordination of security, defence and foreign policies. These omissions most probably reflected the perception by the local rulers that “the legitimacy of the GCC for the Gulf people rests on its being instrumental to the fundamental goal of development”⁵; however, security and strategic matters have attracted most of the attention of the GCC since its inception. The Abu Dhabi conference was held when hostilities between Iraq and Iran renewed, which continued until 1988 in arguably the most severe war in the recent history of the Middle East, had already begun.

The GCC devised various institutional instruments for tackling sub-regional internal and inter-state conflicts. Article 10 of the Charter gives the Supreme Council the possibility to establish, when necessary, a Commission for the Settlement of Dispute. Even though no definition of “dispute” is provided by the document, the area of action of such Commission is commonly believed to include territorial and military, as well as economic, disputes between member states. As early as in May 1981, a Military Committee was also established within the GCC Sec-

² Ch. Tripp, *Regional Organizations in the Arab Middle East*, Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 293.

³ L. Guazzone, *Gulf Co-operation Council: The Security Policies*, “Survival”, 30, 1988, 2, p. 134.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

retariat, which helped organise joint military exercises in 1983 and 1984, and to establish a 2,500-strong joint rapid deployment force (“Peninsula Shield”) in 1985. The Council is also deemed to have contributed to the resolution of a range of local conflicts, including the boundary clashes between Oman and South Yemen in 1982 and between Qatar and Bahrain in 1986–87⁶, and the 1990 Gulf War⁷.

Even in the absence of clear empirical data and structured comparisons, the GCC is still on balance perceived as a relatively successful organisation in dealing with regional conflicts⁸ noted that the traditional territorial and dynastic quarrels have found in the GCC Commission for the Settlement of Disputes an effective mediation instrument at both intra-GCC and regional levels⁹ suggested that the role of the GCC in the 1980s hinted towards the development of “a set of norms and procedures for dealing with internal disputes and coordinating policies towards external actors that took [GCC states] beyond the parameters of a modest alliance and pushed them toward a more binding framework”. While acknowledging that the GCC may need to “establish more efficient conflict avoidance and resolution mechanism”¹⁰ stresses that, in contrast with other sub-regional organisations such as ASEAN, “the GCC states have been moving fairly rapidly and efficiently toward creating diplomatic and legal mechanisms for the adjudication of their own territorial differences” and that the GCC also initiated “substantial diplomatic efforts to end the Iran–Iraq war, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and other regional conflicts”¹¹.

At a closer look, the effective involvement of the main institutional bodies of the GCC in most of these crises is far from clear. Despite the provisions included in the GCC Charter for the creation of a Commission for the Settlement of Disputes, there seems to be “no evidence to suggest that the commission has ever met to treat territorial disputes be-

⁶ W. Tow, *Subregional Security Cooperation in the Third World*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, London, 1990, p. 50; R. K. Ramazani, *The Gulf Cooperation Council...*, p. 123–127.

⁷ M.-G. Barnett III, F. Geogory, *Caravans in Opposite Directions: Society, State, and the Developments of Community in the Gulf Cooperation Council*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 180

⁸ L. Guazzone, *Gulf Co-operation Council...*, p. 196.

⁹ M.-G. Barnett III, F. Geogory, *Caravans in Opposite Directions...*, p. 176.

¹⁰ W. Tow, *Subregional Security Cooperation...*, p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

tween member states”¹². No evidence also seems to exist to suggest that the GCC Secretariat has been directly involved in these negotiations through the creation of mediation missions or delegations, nor have other official bodies of the GCC been involved in discussing local disputes, as “member states of the GCC have chosen generally not to refer territorial problems for formal treatment by the council”¹³.

We analyse some of these crises that the Gulf Cooperation Council is recently engaged in mediation.

EGYPT CRISIS

Hosni Mubarak’s regime and its power system enjoyed remarkable stability for over 30 years. On 11 February 2011, after 18 days of mass protests, the Egyptian president was forced to step down, revealing the unsustainability of the political and economic system that had ensured his continuity for so long. While the revolution of January 25th led to a major success – the fall of Hosni Mubarak – Egypt’s political future is still opaque and exposed to a number of risks. Over the last two decades, the state social welfare system in Egypt has gone through a serious crisis, which accelerated in the last years. While the government continued to be the main provider of education and health services, such services were no longer free and their quality worsened dramatically because public expenditure on social services declined. The retrenchment of the state’s welfare provision accelerated in recent years. Public expenditure on education and health services was cut.

These developments could open the stage for an authoritarian involu- tion and further aggravate Egypt’s socio-economic challenges. If Egypt’s political transition takes the direction of a controlled and unfinished political transformation, which preserves the old system of power, the country may fail to address its main long-term socio-economic challenges. Since Egypt’s political transition is backed by the military and regime loyalists, public authorities will have no interest in tackling crony capitalism and pervasive corruption. Moreover, in so far as Egypt’s political situation remains unclear and unstable, this may discourage private and foreign in-

¹² R. Schofield, *Boundaries, Territorial Disputes and the GCC States*, [in:] D. E. Long, C. Koch (eds), London: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1997, p. 146.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

vestment. In addition, if the new parliament will be poorly representative, Egypt's future economic and social policies will continue to reflect the interests of a limited number of people, eventually the most conservative forces of the country. This said, in the absence of effective policies, that to ease the crisis and respond to Egypt's urgent socio-economic problems, social discontent is unlikely to be contained¹⁴.

But Gulf provision of aid and development financing (in all its guises) prevented the total collapse of the Egyptian economy amid three years of near-constant political turmoil and steep falls in vital economic sectors, such as tourism. However, seen from an international "good governance" perspective, the aid from GCC states is more problematic in terms of the policy choices it has enabled Egyptian officials to make or, just as importantly, to avoid. In addition to reducing pressure on the government to seek a US \$4.8 billion loan from the IMF, as Morsi had been doing, Gulf support allowed the Egyptian finance minister to avoid having to raise taxes or cut public spending by utilising the incoming monies to cut its burgeoning budget deficit. While this meant that further volatility could be temporarily avoided by putting off politically sensitive austerity measures, and also resulted in the first post-2011 rise in Egypt's sovereign credit rating, Gulf financial assistance lacked the conditionality associated with IMF support, and was granted without regard for monitoring or implementation procedures, effectively doing away with any notion of tying disbursement to minimal standards of good governance¹⁵.

The sudden removal of President Morsi and the return of military-led rule to Egypt in July 2013 was followed by immediate and large-scale pledges of assistance by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. Over US \$12 billion was promised in the week after the counter-coup alone, and was quickly disbursed, unlike many pledges of GCC aid in other circumstances. By late October 2013, the UAE had, for example, assembled a comprehensive economic package totalling US \$4.9 billion, consisting of a US \$1 billion grant transferred to the Egyptian government in July, US \$1 billion in petroleum products to help meet Egypt's fuel and hydro-

¹⁴ M. Baran, *Multisectoral securitizations in the post-revolutionary middle east: The case of egypt*, <http://www.bilgesam.org/Images/Dokumanlar/0-330-2014090919guvenlik2.pdf>, p. 27.

¹⁵ A. Alsharif, P. Wer, *Egypt to Use Gulf Billions to Spur Economy*, Reuters, 21 August 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/20/us-egypt-protests-finance-idUSBRE97J0YB20130820>.

carbon needs, and US \$2.9 billion in aid for development and infrastructure projects designed to revive Egypt's ailing economy¹⁶.

Most remarkably, on a visit to Cairo in early September 2012, HBJ publicly announced that Qatar would invest a staggering US \$18 billion in Egypt over five years. Commenting that there would be "no limits" to Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood-ruled country struggling to find conventional funds to balance Egypt's budget, HBJ stated that US \$8 billion would be invested in an integrated power plant, natural gas, and iron steel project in Port Said, while the remaining US \$10 billion would finance the construction of a tourism marina complex on the Mediterranean coastline. However, the announcement was noticeably lacking in details of how the funds would be disbursed, and, similar to previous headline-grabbing suggestions of aid in May 2011, ultimately never materialised¹⁷. Shortly afterward, the commercial links between Egypt and Qatar thickened with an announced partnership between private equity firm Nile Capital and one of HBJ's sons, Jabir, to create a US \$250 million fund to invest in education across the Middle East and North Africa¹⁸.

But the situation in Egypt is still unstable security but not collapsed economically, so that the economic and political mediation of the Gulf Cooperation Council has somewhat succeeded.

YEMEN CRISIS

In Yemen, public resentment over elite corruption has found sustained non-violent expression in a nationwide pro-democracy movement. Hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets of the capital, Sana'a, and a number of provincial cities in January 2011, and maintained a presence on the streets throughout February, March and April. The protestors called for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to stand down immediately after three decades in power, and rejected all proposals for a phased transition that would defer his departure until the end of an interim period in which constitutional changes would be agreed.

¹⁶ El Dahan M., Werr P., *UAE Signs \$4.9 Billion Aid Package to Egypt*, Reuters, 26 October 2013, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/10/26/uk-uae-egypt-idUKBRE99P08620131026>.

¹⁷ *Qatar Seeks to Invest and Secure its Footing in the New Egypt*, "Gulf States Newsletter", 932, 27 September 2012, p. 9–10.

¹⁸ *Egyptian Private Equity Firm Teams Up with HBJ Son*, "Gulf States Newsletter", 934, 25 October 2012, p. 13.

As popular support for Yemen's revolution gathered momentum, long-standing competition within the country's ruling elite came into open view. In March, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, head of the 1st Armoured Division and the commander of Yemen's North-Western District, publicly split from Saleh, declaring his support for the opposition. Neither this nor a wave of successive defections from within the political elite generated enough pressure to convince President Saleh to relinquish control. The prospect of an extended stalemate between rival military factions in Sana'a contributed to growing fears of civil war and government paralysis. In April, the GCC proposed a series of initiatives, putting pressure on the president to accept a negotiated transition, albeit one that would in effect keep power in the hands of established political actors rather than letting it develop in the grassroots movement that has emerged prior to the 2011 "Arab spring", the death of Osama bin Laden and the subsequent risk of al-Qaeda retaliation, Yemen had already been rising sharply up the international policy agenda in the past few years. This was largely because of the presence of a local al-Qaeda franchise, considered the most active branch of the global organization. However, concerns about Yemen's stability extend far beyond a preoccupation with terrorism to encompass challenges to the government's competence and legitimacy from northern "Houthi" rebels and southern separatists. In addition, the economy is in a perilous state: oil production has passed its peak, falling by nearly half since 2002, and investment outside the energy sector is negligible¹⁹.

More than a third of Yemen's population is undernourished, and social violence related to land disputes and diminishing water resources leads to several thousand fatalities each year²⁰.

Until early 2011, Saudi Arabia avoided putting public pressure on Saleh, despite mounting frustration with his leadership. But as the political crisis escalated after General Ali Mohsin's defection in March, Riyadh put its weight behind a GCC initiative to ease President Saleh out of office²¹.

However, informal models of transnational patronage that characterize aspects of Saudi Arabia's relationship with the Yemeni regime and the

¹⁹ *Yemen Country Report*, Economist Intelligence Unit, April 2011, http://www.bti-project.de/uploads/tx_itao_download/BTI_2012_Yemen.pdf.

²⁰ *Under Pressure: Social Violence over Land and Water in Yemen*, Yemen Armed Violence Assessment, International Food Policy Research Institute, Issue Brief No 2, October 2010.

²¹ „Financial Times”, 10 April 2011.

tribes run in parallel with formal processes of mediation and multilateral diplomacy, and many Yemenis question Saudi Arabia's ability to act as an impartial mediator. This highlights the value of the GCC's formal collective role in mediation and the formulation of transition proposals since April. While the centre of gravity remains clearly in Riyadh, these initiatives have had a collective imprimatur although specific Qatari and UAE diplomacy was also active within this framework.

The personalisation and predominantly ad hoc nature of much GCC decision-making is another hurdle to embedding concepts of transparency and accountability (to say nothing of good governance) within institutional frameworks. In 2008, for example, Qatari mediators pledged between US \$300 million and US \$500 million in reconstruction for the war-torn Yemeni province of Sa'ada, where anti-government rebels had been battling the central government since 2004. However, when the Qatari mediation efforts failed in 2009 and fighting resumed, assistance pledges were abruptly withdrawn, contributing to a new source of tension between the local community and the government as the former wrongly attributed to the latter the absence of the hoped-for development projects²².

The GCC proposal on 23 April for a 30-day handover period to a transitional unity government, subject to immunity for President Saleh and his family, was rejected, then accepted, then again seemingly ignored by him over the course of three days, before he signalled his willingness to Abdullatif al-Zayani flew to Sana'a to obtain Saleh's signature, while the GCC foreign ministers waited in Riyadh to receive the opposition delegation on the following day. President Saleh's last-minute refusal to sign the deal triggered "hectic political consultations among Gulf leaders"²³ and phone calls between Saleh and several GCC monarchs, in which they discussed ways to salvage the agreement, regardless of the timing and details of the eventual political transition, Yemeni business tycoon and opposition politician Hameed al-Ahmar is among the contenders expected to attempt to benefit from the power shift. Hameed is the son of the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the Saudi royal family's key patronage broker in Yemen until his death in 2007. Hameed's eldest brother, Sadeq, is now paramount chief of the Hashid confederation, while another brother, Hussein, organ-

²² H. Tomlinson, E. Michael, C. Iona, *US attacks al-Qaeda in Yemen; civilian casualties in secret cruise missile strikes*, "The Times", 9 December 2010.

²³ G. A. Khan, S. Al-Batati, *GCC plans more talks on Yemen*, "Arab News", 2 May, 2011.

ized the Saudi-backed Hashid militia during the Sa'dah war. As Yemen's political crisis intensified during February and March, the brothers began to stake out a more aggressive leadership position. In a BBC interview on 31 March, Hameed called for President Saleh to leave the country, not just step down from power²⁴.

According to Yemeni sources, the al-Ahmar family has provided financial support to people living inside the pro-thought to come from regional sponsors. However, several Saudi observers have privately expressed the view that Hameed is a "businessman, not a politician", while General Ali Mohsin is looked on favourably in certain circles in Riyadh. Others argue that Yemen's own "intrinsic dynamics" will determine the future political trajectory, and there is a sense among the technocrats advising senior Saudi princes that preferences are still being discussed and policy towards the transition is still being made²⁵.

Many Yemeni pro-democracy activists reject the idea of lending their support to a leadership bid from another member of the power elite who will simply perpetuate the current political settlement. Instead, they have promised to hold out for a peaceful transfer of power to a civilian authority, a new constitution that boosts the role of parliament and a federal system of government. Independent youth activists are slowly developing their own management structure and deciding on mechanisms to nominate leaders, but by the end of April this process was not sufficiently advanced to enable them to send observers to the GCC transition talks.

The foreign policy of the Gulf states and their potential role in Yemen are shaped and constrained by a number of common factors as well as individual specificities²⁶.

Their style of policy-making and implementation has typically families. Institutional capacity for policy formulation, implementation, coordination and follow-up remains limited, notwithstanding the very gradual professionalization of foreign policy bureaucracies.

The Gulf states have all shown a long-term pattern of pragmatism and combined the aim of obtaining great power protection with securing

²⁴ *Yemen's Hamid al-Ahmar urges President Saleh to leave*, BBC News, 31 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12917913>.

²⁵ „Financial Times”, 10 April 2011.

²⁶ A. Keiswetter, *The Arab Spring: Implications for US Policy and Interests*, Middle East Institute, 13 January 2012, <http://www.mei.edu/content/arab-spring-implications-us-policy-and-interests>.

a measure of autonomy. Their prime focus has traditionally been on the region. A more global focus has tended to appear only in so far as it secured regional aims or the states' economic interest – although an emerging interest has become evident recently in issues of global governance. Yet *political* involvement by these states tended to be limited to serving their immediate security needs or towards settling or containing conflict in the region. They rarely took a strong leadership role, with the occasional exception of Saudi Arabia and, since 1995, Qatar. However, early 2011 has seen Qatar's example in this respect being followed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular.

Finally, there has been a strong tendency to bilateralism, whether in aid, strategic or economic policy, with the exception of GCC's coordination of trade negotiations with the EU, the construction of a GCC economic community of sorts and, most recently, policy towards Yemen²⁷.

BAHRIAN AND SYRIAN CRISIS

Gulf States' responses to the Arab spring upheaval in MENA states. Gulf aid and assistance provided the new political elites in North Africa with alternative sources of financial support that were not tied to governance performance or political reform. Qatar and Saudi Arabia also played leading roles in mobilising and arming the Syrian opposition to Bashar al-Assad, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in Bahrain to prevent the upheaval from enveloping a fellow ruling family. However, the continuing conflict in Syria and the burgeoning rapprochement between Iran and the international community have highlighted the geopolitical challenges that can and will arise when regional and international objectives diverge. In both cases, Gulf leaders now must decide whether and how to engage in multilateral diplomatic processes to obtain a collective settlement acceptable to all participants.

King Hamad's 10-year effort to satisfy Shiite aspirations was demonstrated to have failed when a major uprising began on February 14, 2011, in the wake of the success of the uprising in Egypt against President Hosni Mubarak. After a few days of protests and relatively minor confrontations

²⁷ G. Gause, *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia*, [in:] R. Hinnebusch, A. Ehteshami (ed.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002, p. 315–351; G. Nonneman, *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, New York University Press, 2006, p. 335–337.

with the mostly Bahraini Sunni and expatriate Sunni security forces, the mostly Shiite demonstrators converged on the interior of a major traffic circle, “Pearl Roundabout”, named after a statue that depicted Bahrain’s pearl-diving past. The uprising took place after King Hamad had authorized that year’s iteration of an annual \$2,700 payment to citizens. The initial demands of the protesters centered on altering the constitution to expand the powers of the COR; ending gerrymandering that prevents Shiites from winning a majority in the COR; providing more jobs and economic opportunities; and, among some protesters, replacing hard-line Prime Minister Khalifa. These moves would, to the mostly Shiite demonstrators, end the sense that they are “second class citizens” or “not trusted” as Bahraini citizens. On February 15, 2011, King Hamad spoke to the nation and announced the formation of a committee to investigate the use of force against protesters, which had killed two until that time.

The unrest took on new dimensions in the early morning of February 17, 2011, when security forces surrounded the thousands of demonstrators in Pearl Roundabout, many of whom were asleep, and used rubber bullets and tear gas to remove them from the location. At least four demonstrators were killed; others died subsequently. The government asserted it had warned of the impending move. At a news conference on February 17, 2011, Foreign Minister Khalid AlKhalifa claimed that the Pearl Roundabout was cleared to avoid a “sectarian abyss” – all-out civil conflict between the Shiites and Sunnis. Despite heavy security patrols, additional protests took place on February 18, 2011, and security forces shot several demonstrators. Wifaq pulled all 18 of its deputies out of the COR immediately thereafter. Britain closed its embassy and banned arms exports to Bahrain.

In part at the reported urging of the United States, on February 19, 2011, the government pulled security forces back from confronting protesters. That day, demonstrators re-entered Pearl Roundabout and held large demonstrations at or around that location subsequently. A February 22, 2011, demonstration was said to be perhaps the largest in Bahrain’s history, although some accounts say that a demonstration three days later, which spanned miles of downtown roadwas, was even larger. The February 22, 2011 demonstration followed by one day a large counter-demonstration by mostly Sunni supporters of the government. The government, with Crown Prince Salman leading the effort, invited the rep-

representatives of the protesters to begin a formal dialogue. That effort was supported by a gesture by King Hamad on February 22, 2011, to release or pardon 308 Bahrainis, including Al Haq leader Hassan Mushaima, paving the way for him to return from exile a few days later. According to the government, these persons were tried not for political views, but for committing or advocating violence. On February 26, 2011, King Hamad dropped two Al Khalifa family members from cabinet posts that influence job opportunities and living conditions. On March 13, 2011, Crown Prince Salman articulated “seven principles” that would guide a national dialogue, including a “parliament with full authority”; a “government that meets the will of the people”; fair voting districts; and several other measures²⁸.

The articulation of the seven principles gave Wifaq and other moderate oppositionists hope that many of their demands could be met through dialogue. However, the protesters did not leave Pearl Roundabout and longstanding splits in the opposition were exposed, such as that between Wifaq and Al Haq. Anger at the government’s use of force appeared to shift many demonstrators closer to Al Haq and six smaller hardline Shiite political groups that demand resignation of the monarchy²⁹.

The regime’s offer of dialogue was not taken up consistently or systematically by Wifaq and other moderate groups, and only informal meetings took place in search of a political solution. With no systematic dialogue begun, protests escalated and began to spark Sunni-Shiite clashes, which some Bahrainis believed were evolving into outright sectarian conflict at the mass level³⁰.

On March 13, 2011, despite the crown prince’s articulation of his “seven points”, protesters blockaded the financial district of the capital, Manama, prompting governmental fears that the unrest could choke this major economic sector. Security forces appeared overwhelmed. Later that same day, Bahrain requested that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), of which it is a member, send additional security forces to protect key sites. In response to the request, on March 14, 2011, a GCC force (from

²⁸ *The events of the uprising, and the government’s political and security reaction*, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report released 23 November 2011, <http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>, p. 165.

²⁹ *Bahrain Hard-Liners Call for Royal Family to Go*, CNN Wire Staff, 9 March 2011: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/09/bahrain.protests/>.

³⁰ *The events of the uprising...*, p. 166.

the GCC joint Peninsula Shield unit) spearheaded by a reported 1,200 Saudi armored forces and 600 UAE police, crossed into Bahrain and took up positions at key locations in and around Manama. Kuwait sent naval forces to help Bahrain secure its maritime borders. On March 15, 2011, King Hamad declared (Royal Decree Number 18) a three month state of emergency. Bahrain's security forces, freed up by the GCC deployment, cleared demonstrators from Pearl Roundabout and demolished the Pearl Monument on March 18, 2011.

Some additional protester deaths were reported in this renewed crackdown. In conjunction, seven hardline Shiite leaders were re-arrested, including *Al Haq's* Mushaima. The remaining Shiite ministers in the cabinet, many of the Shiites in the Shura Council, and many Shiites in other senior posts in the judiciary, suspended their work in government or resigned outright. The Saudi intervention did not, as some feared, prompt a wider conflict by prompting Iranian intervention on the side of the Shiite protesters.

Well before intervening in Bahrain, the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, had begun to fear that the Bahrain unrest could spread to other GCC states. It was also feared that Iran might be able to exploit the situation. None of the other GCC states has a Shiite majority (like Bahrain), but most of them, including Saudi Arabia, have substantial Shiite minorities. The Saudi position has been not to permit a Shiite takeover in Bahrain, and the Saudi government is seen as backing hardline, anti-compromise officials in the Bahrain ruling family.

Perhaps to reinforce this position, on May 14, 2012, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced they supported a plan to form a close political, economic, and military union among the GCC states a signal to Bahrain's Shiite opposition that the Bahrain government has unconditional Saudi backing. At a GCC leadership meeting in Riyadh that day, the other four GCC states opposed such a union and the GCC as a whole formally deferred a decision on the Saudi-Bahraini plan. Earlier, shortly after the Bahrain crisis began, the GCC states had pledged aid (some reports mention \$20 billion) to help Bahrain (and Oman, which also faced unrest) try to defuse unrest through job creation (Frederic Wehrey, February 2013).

Were it not for the GCC security, political and economic crisis intervention in Bahrain exposed to the sectarian conflict that almost lead to the emergence of a civil war.

CONCLUSION

The points of strength and weakness in the Gulf context, the Arab Spring has revealed the existence of elements of strength and weakness in the Gulf security equation, especially regarding the priority of internal threats over regional threats to the security and stability of the Gulf. The Gulf Cooperation Council, as a regional organization, has largely benefitted from the Arab Spring, coming out stronger and asserting its influence in times of crisis. The GCC organization was employed to strengthen common Gulf action in the Gulf region and in the greater Arab world. The member states have also grown to rely more on the GCC, especially considering military and security coordination; thinking and acting collectively are among the most prominent strong suits of the GCC states. The events of the Arab Spring have laid the groundwork for further cooperation and coordination. The strength of the Council was apparent when Desert Shield forces entered Bahrain, deciding the conflict in favor of the ruling family, even if momentarily. The GCC's military intervention in Bahrain was a spectacular act that sent multiple messages to internal and external parties, asserting that – from now on– the GCC countries are in possession of military capabilities that cannot be ignored.

The strict employment of military resources, without resorting to the traditional (American) sources of foreign aid was the most notable development in cooperative Gulf action. As such, the Arab Spring came to present a certificate of validity for the GCC in an essential, previously untested, domain. Politically speaking, Gulf diplomacy was employed in several cases recently, most notably in the conflict over power in Yemen. Gulf diplomacy was the only active outside party on the Yemeni scene, becoming able, with the support of the United Nations, to decide the conflict over power with the election of a new president for two years³¹. The invitation presented by the GCC leaders, during their consultative meeting in Riyadh in May 2011, to Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC, reflects the increasing self-confidence, as well as the enactment of the notion of the expansion of the collective Gulf umbrella to include the other monarchist Arab regimes that are facing the winds of change.

³¹ D. Raghidah, *Security Concerns and Political Reform in the GCC*, on Twitter, 21 May 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/raghida-dergham/security-concerns-and-pol_b_865126.html.

This Gulf initiative, which surprised everybody at home and abroad, came as a momentary, circumstantial, and spontaneous reaction, and the principle of inviting new members to the GCC was and resources that can be employed for the interest of hereditary states that are outside the GCC system – during critical and decisive stages. Then came the GCC summit of Riyadh in December 2011, announcing the shift from the formula of “Gulf cooperation” to the stage of the “Gulf Union”, along the lines of the European Union a further sign of confidence in the Gulf cooperative project, in addition to future ambitions and the desire to benefit from the accumulation of 30 years of experience in Gulf cooperative action. The call to shift into a Gulf Union is not a circumstantial and momentary one, but is rather a long-term strategic option that sends a clear message saying that the project of Gulf cooperation has fully and irreversibly surpassed the phase of uncertainty to that of certainty. The GCC has come to stay, persist, and evolve with the evolution of Gulf and regional events³².

The Arab Spring has provided an opening for the GCC as a group and for Saudi Arabia as a long-time aspiring leader of the Arab world to try to expand their regional influence and global profile. An already weakened Arab state system with a gradually rehabilitated Egypt under Mubarak’s leadership, has been once again weakened by the sweeping wave of rebellion. Saudi Arabia sought to seize the initiative, by not only containing the rebellion close to its shores in Bahrain but by also leading a region-wide counter-revolution. The kingdom’s extension of \$4 billion to Egypt to shore up the post-Mubarak state was part of a calculated strategy to buy influence and ensure prominence.

Arab world – despite the emergence and consolidation and mounting pressures that patronage and repression by authoritarian regimes will not be able to contain indefinitely. At the Gulf regional level, the fruits of the Arab spring are already visible in the lack of clarity of the Gulf Union’s goals and the increasingly divergent paths followed by GCC member states. The widening gap between the member states’ political systems has already started to influence the GCC and its ability to remain a meaningful organization, regionally and globally, the GCC will be able to renew itself and find a new equilibrium in a region in flux for the years to come.

As is clear to us that the GCC has a great economic power, being able to control and crisis management in order failed to conduct external and

³² F. Famaz, *Arab Spring Turns Up Heat on Iran*, „Wall Street Journal“, 31 August 31 2011.

internal interests at risk and to earn many loyalists and protect its interests in the region.

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