



Middle East
Centre

THE NEW POLITICS OF INTERVENTION OF GULF ARAB STATES



Workshop Report
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Cover image: A Qatar Emiri Air Force Dassault Mirage 2000-5 fighter jet takes off as part of the Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn mission in Libya, 2011, Souda Bay, Greece. Copyright: US Air Force, source: flickr.com.

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INTRODUCTION

This report contains a summary of the workshop entitled 'The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States', which was held on Wednesday 26 March at the LSE Middle East Centre. Nine papers were presented to an audience that included academics based in the UK and the Gulf¹, members of think tanks and agencies, and civil servants with an interest in the region.

Issues for discussion included:

- Paradigmatic framework: the use of complex realism in assessing Gulf foreign policy.
- State formation and militarisation: its causes, qualities and effects on foreign policy.
- The role of the GCC²: identity, cohesion, and foreign relations.
- Case studies: Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- Gulf interventionist foreign policies.

PARADIGMATIC FRAMEWORKS

The morning session took theoretical frameworks as its starting point. Complex realism, the acknowledgement of domestic mobilisation and domestic threats, as well as regional and international factors in the analysis of foreign policy, was introduced as a framework that may allow us to move beyond the 'black box' concept of leadership in the Gulf. As the effects of the 'Arab Awakening' continue to be felt, we are likely to see the emergence of apparently inexplicable twists and turns in the foreign policy environment of the GCC. Today, politics are no longer contained within the family groupings of the monarchies alone, but are rather discussed among citizens and expatriate residents alike. A more nuanced understanding of domestic environments is required, focussing mainly on: accelerated spending and state expansion; increased efforts of the monarchies to band together; soft power and identity factors - for example the maverick political image of Qatar.

¹ In this report, the terms 'Gulf', 'Gulf states', 'Arab Gulf states', all refer to the Gulf Cooperation Council states (GCC).

² The Gulf Cooperation Council was formed in 1981 and consists of the six member-states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Foreign aid patterns are core tools for understanding state identities and, through them, changes in regional dynamics. However, the highly politicised nature of Arab foreign aid means that it cannot be categorised purely as 'aid'. Gulf aid is difficult to track: much occurs outside of official channels, involving cash transactions and a lack of reporting mechanisms. It can, nevertheless, be used as a tool to support different groups according to the prevalent ideology of the day.

As soon as the current ideology becomes threatening, it is discarded in favour of another – which was the case, for example, with Arab nationalism. Foreign aid is therefore useful for tracing the evolution of state identity.

STATE FORMATION AND MILITARISATION

Within the last few years, the Gulf has been engaged in a continuous state-formation process, including centralisation, the creation of new actors, expansion of new bureaucracies, and militarisation. However, Qatar can be considered somewhat of an exception; while its foreign ministry has grown, the multiplicity of actors has not. There exist many actors, but it remains prone to inertia with its top-down structure and a lack of centralised authority.

The militarisation trend in the GCC states is relatively novel, particularly in the UAE and Qatar, who officially supplied military aid to Libya. This was the first time they had intervened militarily – constituting a watershed in the region. Since 2003, military expenditure in the region has tripled, caused by both power projection and threat perception, for instance in the case of the UAE where state security requirements are growing in complexity and many feel under threat from the demographic imbalance caused by expatriates, which in turn encourages Emiratis to join the security forces. However, they also join for the prestige, particularly in the case of the airforce, as many relate well with the armed forces commander, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Identity factors are involved not only in regard to the armed forces, but also in the nuclear power industry, where there is a set development goal. The kind of institutions a state invests in tells a lot about how state and society will interact, and what the 'state identity' purports to be.

Part of these militarisation initiatives must also be seen as defence mechanisms to counter Iran and the perceived necessity of creating a standardised GCC defence structure. Since a single command structure

cannot be run with different kinds of weapons systems, since 2005, the GCC states have been seriously considering retooling to enable a more collective response.

Another factor to consider when looking at reasons for this increased militarisation is the role played by arms suppliers themselves; they are not only encouraging the GCC states towards more spending, but also directing their choices in arms and supplies – namely, high ticket items such as drone programmes.

While models of statebuilding are important, dynamics in the region are still very much about personalities. Parallels can be traced between Saudi Arabia's reactions to the recent upheavals across the Arab World and to the revolutions of the 50s and 60s, for example, as the same people were in charge during both periods.

The GCC states are pursuing interventionist policies as a result of various combinations of assertiveness and defensiveness. For some, like Qatar and the UAE, active foreign policy is a recent development; for others, like Saudi Arabia, it is not. Intervention is triggered by perceived threats, but it is also about branding: identity-construction is influencing actions.

THE ROLE OF THE GCC: IDENTITY, COHESION, AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

Though some questioned whether it is still meaningful to talk about 'GCC foreign policy', given that in the last decade, we have witnessed varied behaviour from the different states within the regional bloc, participants agreed that the organisation still has an important and unique role to play. There are common parameters around which all the states agree, despite the individual, and at times contradictory, attitudes towards specific issues. The GCC also provides a platform from which to mediate some of these issues. It can even be compared to the European Union, which, similarly, doesn't share a single foreign policy, but does have enough common grounds to be considered one entity.

The GCC has gained much influence through the purchasing power of several of its member states. However, it has also recently suffered tensions as a result of this international footprint, particularly with regards to internal cohesion. It is one unintended consequence of militarisation: the regional arms race has had the side effect of hindering GCC cooperative ability.

Relations between the GCC and other global players have evolved. Particularly dramatic has been the change in relations with the United States, whose role in the Gulf has been declining, as it pivots towards Asia. The Gulf states have watched as the US refused to intervene in Syria; they have seen the failure of past GDP handovers to the United States in securing protection during the Arab uprisings; and they are now witnessing a rapprochement developing between the USA and Iran, despite the GCC's continuing view of the latter as a threat.

The question of whether a 'post-America' Middle East will be more multipolar depends on whether the Gulf states continue to assume that someone else will make the decisions when the US does not. However, the US cannot simply be discounted from the scene in the future. Although the American pivot has been turning towards Asia, it is never about leaving the Middle East. It is not a zero-sum game, but rather a rebalancing of attention.

Participants observed that we should also look at Gulf foreign policy towards the rest of the world, not just within the Middle East and towards the US. Does there exist, individually or collectively, some coherent foreign policy towards the rest of the world, and is there any sign of greater integration into the international system? One must be conscious of a multispeed world with multispeed engagement, where policies are always underpinned by security concerns, and whoever can provide security is deemed a friend. The GCC states have the ability to pick and choose, to mix and match. They view the Obama administration as weak and are already mindful of other rising powers. There are, for example, more Chinese in Dubai than Americans; and, from an economic perspective, relationships at the highest levels of finance are being cultivated. There are also many links with Brazil and India, and there is clearly robust forward thinking going on about where future connections, networks and policy orientations should lie.

CASE STUDIES: QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE

The question of why Qatar still supports the *Ikhwan*, when most of its population is Salafist, was raised. The *Ikhwan's* long history of involvement in the Qatari educational system on an elite level, with *da'wa*, or proselytising, cementing this role, has provided the context in which the *Ikhwan* can perform their usual practice of outreach through education and charity, and thus expand their influence in the state.

While the 'Ikhwanisation' in Qatar did not happen in a fit of absentmindedness, one should still acknowledge that the Qatari population is very small (around 300,000). Relying on a few resources, like cash, *Al Jazeera* and political links, the Qatari government needed the *Ikhwan* to staff their schools. While relying on these resources, their foreign policy is aimed at making themselves as important to as many actors as is possible.

There was discussion about the significance of the dispute between various Gulf states, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain seemingly on one side, and Qatar and Oman on the other. Participants considered whether, with Oman currently siding with the Qataris, there would be a division in the GCC, and what future lies ahead for Emirati and Saudi relations. Why would they side together now when they have experienced so many problems in the past, particularly border disputes? One participant posited that there is a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE because the latter perceives existential threats around it and knows that only Saudi Arabia would do anything to address them. This was learnt from recent events in Bahrain. Others agreed that the UAE siding with the Saudis is a natural phenomenon. Saudi Arabia is not an economic competitor – but Qatar is. The model of the UAE can be replicated in Qatar, whereas Saudi Arabia does not constitute an economic threat. Global business in Dubai cannot move to Riyadh, but it can move to Doha, and that is where the competition lies.

One participant explored the Saudi regime's frenzied response to the Arab uprisings and its strong distrust of the Muslim Brotherhood, both inspired by the conservative monarchy's predisposition towards the status quo. Four relatively recent losses experienced by the Saudis in the foreign policy arena were detailed. First, the loss of traditional regional allies as the political landscape of the region shifted during the Arab Spring; second, the loss of the support of Islamists, who, inspired by the

results of recent elections to overcome their suspicions surrounding the concept of democracy, now appear threatening to the Gulf absolute monarchies; the third loss was GCC cohesion, with the Saudis having antagonised several states and leaders in the region over the last decade or so; finally, the loss of trust in the US, following the latter's refusal to prove a reliable ally during the Arab Spring.

The relative position of Saudi Arabia within the GCC was discussed. Does it feel its primacy is threatened, and does this translate into its foreign policy? From a Saudi point of view, the state sees its regional position as characterised by its wealth, holy sites, geography, and size, it being the largest country in the region. It has a superiority complex and any smaller country that tries to achieve anything is seen as a threat. In some respect, the Saudis have been losing to Qatar; but, then again, they don't actually view it as a unitary state and arguably feel superior to it. It was noted that perhaps there exists a Saudi push towards hegemony.

The UAE was used as a case study for analysing foreign policy through a regime security lens, observing not just interactions between powers but also the dynamics inside palaces and society, and how that trickles up to foreign policy. It was described as a 'counterrevolutionary' actor on the international stage. A pattern of using soft power to increase the country's international and regional influence up until the Arab Spring shifted after 2011, when the country, though not experiencing revolution of the kind witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia, did experience numerous attempts (many in the form of petitions) at political reform and responded harshly. It gave a very clear message that dissent was not to be tolerated. It sent soldiers to Bahrain during its uprising, bolstering the monarchy there – a foreign policy seemingly different from its peaceful tendencies in previous times.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

The concept of sectarianism is an important one in discussions of Gulf foreign policy today. With foreign policy drivers coming out of their secular shells, the word 'martyr' being used in the aftermath of police and protester deaths, and Twitter being a fertile ground for making comments about religious identity, it was suggested that sectarianism is opening a Pandora's box in the region.

The importance of the Muslim Brotherhood was highlighted by participants. Discourse on the Muslim Brotherhood can be viewed in the same light as a sectarian discourse, and Gulf foreign policy could be presented as a fight over ownership of Islam. One participant suggested that Qatar is trying to 'steal' Wahhabism from the Saudis. There was disagreement over this point, with some maintaining that, while Qatar is promoting a new Wahhabism, it is not trying to take over the mantle. It knows it cannot outshine Saudi Arabia's religious role, and so it is more likely to be simply shoring up a particular demographic within Qatar. The relationship between the two states is not coloured primarily by religion: Saudi Arabia is not reacting to religious threats from Qatar, but rather striving to lead the Arab world. The Saudis feel the need to be seen as the main arbiters of Arab politics.

GULF INTERVENTIONIST FOREIGN POLICIES

Analysing Gulf involvement in regional conflicts, especially those arising as a result of the revolutions of the Arab Spring, is crucial for a holistic understanding of Gulf foreign policy today and, indeed, of the conflicts themselves.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are heavily involved in the Syrian civil war. There is significant state sponsorship of various groupings, in addition to activity from independent Gulf charities and individuals. While many have begun to interpret the Syrian conflict in sectarian terms, an analysis of the Gulf states' policies within it reveals a much more complex reality, akin to a proxy war, very different to a simple primordial civilisation clash between Shia' and Sunni Muslims. The switching of Gulf support between different opposition groups in Syria has led to factionalisation among the Syrian opposition. When considering the 'success' of these Gulf interventions, it is tempting to imagine that they have had none – Assad is still in power. Nevertheless, with Iran's influence in the region severely damaged, Qatar's regional profile enhanced, and the wave of popular protests making its way through the Middle East halted by Syria's ongoing bloodbath, it could be said that many of the Gulf states' goals have, in fact, been achieved.

Gulf visions for the future of Syria were discussed. In the case of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, neither state truly knows Syria, and both displayed huge arrogance in the belief that they could control outcomes there. Qatari policies tend to aim at establishing friendly Islamist governments, which they may have hoped for in a post-Assad Syria. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is

perhaps less concerned with what a post-Assad Syria looks like in the domestic sense, as long as it stands against Iran in its foreign policy.

Qatari and Emirati foreign policy in the Libyan civil war also had great impact on their own sense of identity, finally becoming states that could intervene in such a war. Qatar, in particular, employed all measures possible towards the toppling of Gaddafi, both military and otherwise. They sent twelve aircraft, almost half of their combat airforce, as well as troops on the ground. They also gave political backing to the opposition and supported the start of a new Libyan TV station. Both realist and constructivist explanations can be given for their involvement, from the maximisation of their security through accumulation of power and balancing to the ideology of pan-Arabism.

Some participants questioned the emphasis on elites acting primarily according to their capabilities, intervening in foreign conflicts simply because they now could, and argued rather that there existed some very strategic thinking regarding Syria. For the Sunni Gulf states, Syria's demographics worked to their advantage. Win over Syria, and you may get Lebanon, and possibly even Palestine. Other participants agreed, yet were cautious about disregarding the importance of the attitudes and goals of these countries' respective leaders. There are of course good strategic rationales behind certain actions, but equally, capability is important. Qatar feels in a position to do something, so it does it. It was a very unusual time in Libya, with a leader more or less universally hated, which provided the opportunity. Qatar decided it wanted to invest money, and what it achieved was arguably remarkable.

The complex history of Saudi interference in Yemen brings out many of the most contradictory dimensions of GCC policy. Saudi Arabia does not see Yemen so much as a stage for foreign policy, but rather as its own backyard, an extension of its domestic concerns. This being the case, there is no clear foreign policy vision. Instead, the Saudi approach to Yemen is centred on manifold and competing persons and institutions. It is a personalised relationship and policy process that predates the crisis there and changes along with the individuals in charge; for example, after the death of Prince Sultan, who had long held the Yemen portfolio. For Saudi Arabia, stability and containment are first on the agenda for policy towards Yemen. The regime knows that anything that happens there will affect Saudi Arabia.

Participants also discussed Qatar and Iran's alleged support of the *Houthis* in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has historically accused Iran of supporting the *Houthis*, but since the recent tensions between Gulf states culminating in the withdrawal of the Saudi, Bahraini and Emirati ambassadors from Qatar, they began to implicate the latter. One participant argued that Iran is not actually providing weaponry, but only training. Qatar is not involved; the Saudi accusation against them is all part of the diplomatic spat surrounding the labelling of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. Participants added that studying Iranian involvement in Yemen is crucial for understanding Yemeni relations with Saudi Arabia and the US. In 2004, President Saleh approached the US ambassador and instrumentalised the Western contentious relationship with Iran, as well as Saudi anxieties, by labelling the *Houthi* war as a case of transnational terrorism. Although it may sometimes seem that way, it is largely misleading to think of Yemen as a passive subject upon which these foreign policies are forced. Yemenis are, in fact, very active in regional politics.

CONCLUSION

Workshop participants addressed in detail a wide variety of issues stemming from the examination of Gulf foreign policy. Different paradigmatic frameworks were considered, and changing regional relations and identities were discussed. New interventionist tendencies of the Gulf states were examined with a particular emphasis on Qatar enhancing its military identity in Libya, the proxy war against the Iranian soft power in Syria, and Saudi Arabia's personalised policy in Yemen. The prevalent idea that Gulf policy-making is like criminology, one can only give coherence to it post facto, was sympathised with and yet challenged. A personalised approach to Gulf foreign policy was highlighted as instrumental. However, participants also agreed that these elites must not be seen to form policy in a vacuum. Their perceptions of their respective populations and political environments will shape their decision-making, as will identity concerns. The Gulf comprises many expanding states that are at liberty to construct new roles for themselves within the regional system and in an evolving Middle East, along with the older hegemonic ambitions of Saudi Arabia. Regime survival, regional clout, response to perceived threats, new military capabilities, political opportunity and identity-construction all play important roles in Gulf foreign policy today.

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