

# THE NEW POLITICS OF INTERVENTION OF GULF ARAB STATES





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**Cover Image:** Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, accompanied by U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Smith, walks to greet U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry upon his arrival in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on June 25, 2013. [US State Department photo/ Public Domain]

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## Foreign Policy Analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Breaking Black Boxes and Explaining New Interventions

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The foreign policy literature on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is plentiful, and certainly has a rich and volatile sample to consider. Foreign policy analysis of the Gulf, however, is often hindered by the 'black box' of leadership within the Gulf Arab states. Our theories, including rentierism, simplify rather than tease out the idiosyncrasies between Gulf states and their mechanisms of policy making. The purpose of this workshop<sup>1</sup> and the papers presented here is to address drivers of foreign policy within GCC member-states, and subsequent interaction and effect of these policies in neighbouring countries. What we might also achieve is some shared conceptual clarity on frameworks for analysing foreign policy in the subregion, and to put forward some hypotheses about how the process of state-building in the region is changing both the agents and the practice of policy making.

This brief paper outlines the existing framework for foreign policy analysis of the GCC. It goes on to suggest how new scholarship might build on traditional explanations of foreign policy choice and implementation by specifying contingent and causal relationships between three levels of analysis: (1) domestic politics, (2) international politics and political economy, and (3) regional dynamics. I use case examples from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar to try and develop an argument that the timing and opportunity for intervention in regional politics have transpired because of leadership shifts within the domestic spheres of these two states, combined with a surge in state wealth that has been directed to projects of state-building, including military equipment and capacity. The international environment has conveniently been in a transition in which unipolarity and the post-1980s American domination of the Gulf are loosening.

The UAE and Qatar are beneficiaries of a second wave of resource wealth, seizing high oil and gas prices of the early 2000s along with global realignments of interests and commitments in the Gulf. The 'emerging interventionists',<sup>2</sup> Qatar and the UAE, are products of the

<sup>1</sup> 'Mapping GCC Foreign Policy', held at the London School of Economics in March 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Young, *The Emerging Interventionists of the GCC* (London: London School of Economics, Middle East Centre, Working Paper Series 2, December 2013).

global political economy, as well as their particular domestic political structures which are opting for larger foreign policy portfolios and engagements, probably for different reasons. In Qatar, a 'black sheep' state identity within the GCC allows for the small state to break easily from its GCC partners, while in the UAE, the federal project of centralising power in Abu Dhabi has scripted military power as a national identity project and unifier of the emirates. The regional status quo has similarly transformed, as the great 'middle' power race between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran has imploded, allowing new players to emerge. However, the linking of regional power aspirations with the economic means to build and direct military capacity comes as a confluence of policy and circumstance. The policy translation is therefore still in its early stages and likely to unsettle established rivals, as we have seen recently between Qatar and its GCC partners.

A working hypothesis would be that an influx of capital, from natural resources or foreign direct investment, allows a nascent state with new leadership to distinguish itself from its previous institutional rule (or ruler) and the regional power structure. Domestic politics may support militarisation for different reasons, such as prestige, unification, nationalism or job creation. If the international community and its great powers are subsequently invested and interested in the rising profile of the nascent state, its capacity for military intervention and foreign policy experimentation can be significant.

## Dominant Frameworks for GCC Foreign Policy Analysis

Theoretical work by scholars Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Nonneman, Baabood and Youngs, among others, explores the particular challenges facing foreign policy articulation in the Middle East and GCC.<sup>3</sup> Working from traditional 'tripartite plus one' explanations of sources of foreign policy, we see the balancing of realist concerns for state power and survival with domestic environments accommodating diverse constituents, and structural considerations of the international system. Within the Middle East, scholars often add a regional dimension that is sometimes preoccupied with ideational and identity concerns of pan-Arabism and Islam. It is a messy set of variables that scholars have tried to condense into some ordered frameworks for empirical investigation. As all foreign policy analysis seeks to balance multiple levels of analysis, some privileging the international system over domestic politics and others more focused on the particular nature of the developmental state, new analyses of GCC states' foreign policies might attempt to delineate further the connections between domestic actors, institutions and international influence. Can we identify the mechanisms that trigger change? When are domestic political institutions and actors likely to engage in regional conflict, and when are they prone to withdraw?

The following subsections outline some of the variance in frameworks privileging either structural or power-focused, 'outside-in' explanations of foreign policy, or domestic and institutional, 'inside-out' explanations. The point here is to draw some parallels between foreign policy frameworks and the temporal nature of the problems they seek to describe. For example, can we see similarities in the challenges of the 1970s, when GCC states faced state-building colliding with insecure international alliances, along with surging energy revenues?

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<sup>3</sup> See Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Complex Realism', in Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 225–44.

### Outside-In Approaches

Ehteshami and Hinnebusch develop the concept of ‘complex realism’ to describe Middle East foreign policy. First in their framework is the traditional realist concern for power and regime survival. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, state power is reliant on external and structural sources of support (superpower military protection and often the export market for petrochemicals).

This assertion is mirrored in the international relations scholarship on the Gulf by scholars such as Gregory Gause, who sees the role of the US or superpower dynamic as central to the longevity of the resource-rich monarchies.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the US role in regional stability and power dynamics now might be similar to that of the 1970s, when a moment of state-building coincided with a regional security vacuum as Great Britain withdrew from Trucial protection agreements. The relationship of the USA with the Middle East, in an era of waning unipolarity and predictions of multipolarity with a rising China and aggressive Russia, creates new challenges for GCC foreign policy. For GCC states, the international environment is ripe for new alliances, but the Gulf states remain insecure in their engagement of international institutions and regional organisations. The structural element of outside powers, and dominant powers, remains an essential input of foreign policy in the GCC.

Second in their framework, Ehteshami and Hinnebusch argue that MENA states must achieve a simultaneous balancing within the regional environment of material threats and competition over control of ideational movements (e.g. pan-Arabism, Islamist movements). These scholars’ approach is mostly an ‘outside-in’ one, which sees the external environment (international/regional) as a constant threat, while the level of sophistication of foreign policy engagement depends on the internal state’s level of institutionalisation. In their framework, we should expect states with greater resources and power capabilities (wealth, population, size, social coherence) to be more activist in their foreign policies. Interestingly, Qatar and the UAE do not exactly fit this model, or at least their ‘small state’ status and different domestic constituencies pose some real challenges.

New work by Richard Youngs privileges the regional level of analysis to explain shifts in Gulf foreign policy. Youngs describes the framework for analysis of the Gulf as ‘competitive multipolarity’ in the new Middle East. He contends there will be not a single dominant power but clusters of shifting coalitions between medium-sized powers. Youngs argues:

States no longer define themselves in accordance with the US–Iran standoff. Arguably, similarly competing positions in relation to Israel and Palestine are also losing at least some of their central definitional or constitutive force in regional geopolitics. The more multi-vector positioning of the Gulf States is instructive in this sense. Today, MENA states appear far more concerned with positioning themselves in relation to changes within the region than with alignments towards external powers.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, ‘The International Politics of the Gulf’, in Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, pp. 272–89.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Youngs, ‘Living with the Middle East’s Old-New Security Paradigm’, in Anna Echeque (ed.), *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings* (Geneva: FRIDE and the Gulf Research Centre, 2013), pp. 15–24 at p. 22.

Again, the outside variables (structural, at either the international or regional level) take the lead in foreign policy explanation. The systemic understanding highlights the global instability that is forcing the MENA states, and especially the GCC, to construct a regional order of their own. The outcome is more regional instability, it seems, as MENA states concentrate on repositioning themselves on both material and ideational bases of strength.

### **Inside-Out Approaches**

Evaluating sources of regime strength requires some empirical measures of the state itself. Measuring and evaluating sources of 'stateness' leads us back to the level of the domestic – the 'inside-out' explanations.

Gerd Nonneman posits that we should frame our analyses with the following order of preference for foreign policy analysis of developing states in the MENA:

1. Start an interpretation from the domestic environment and the survival imperative of regime and state.
2. View this in the context of the regional environment and transnational ideological factors.
3. Appreciate the overall limiting and enabling effects of the international environment.
4. Take into account decision-making structures and decision makers' perceptions, since particular policy choices are indeed capable of making the sort of difference that cannot be explained by structural factors alone.<sup>6</sup>

Nonneman's very prescient analysis of GCC foreign policy from 2003 notes that small states with material resources would have an advantage and some autonomy in regional and international alliance-building. The Qatari willingness to diverge from GCC foreign policy positions was evident then. Nonneman (as well as Ehteshami and Hinnebusch) recognises the importance of the conditions of state formation. The question of 'stateness' or institutionalisation becomes central. This is the 'inside-out' framework, to a degree, which privileges domestic concerns for survival, while also positing that states that are further developed institutionally have more autonomy in foreign policy. Nonneman introduces the key intervening variable: material wealth, particularly from hydrocarbons. The petro-boom of the early 2000s had the effect of boosting institutionalisation (not necessarily power sharing, but state expansion and presence within its domestic environment) and granting a green light to both foreign policy independence and massive military build-up.

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<sup>6</sup> Gerd Nonneman, 'Analyzing the Foreign Policies of the Middle East and North Africa: A Conceptual Framework', *Review of International Affairs* 3/2 (2003), pp. 118–30 at p. 121.

## Breaking Black Boxes: Measuring Institutionalisation in Gulf Arab States

The domestic political environment tends to elicit the most debate and to remain the most elusive to generalisation. Part of this challenge is the ‘black box’ problem of authoritarian states that are tribal- or family-dominated. Two factors have changed since the 1990s in foreign policy and foreign policy analysis that should aid our empirical and theoretical research.

First, states in the GCC are creating new formal institutions (bureaucracies) and investing massively in military capacity. What we know about institutionalisation from the comparative politics literature tells us to expect certain outcomes when state-building is focused in particular sectors.

The broad literature on institutions, state-building and political transitions (usually democratisation) tells us to expect a number of possibilities at a moment when a state is either in formation or in crisis. The institutional setting – that is, what the political community looks like at the moment of crisis or change – can be critical to which institutions emerge (e.g. presidentialism versus parliamentarism, or constitutions that cement privilege for certain groups, such as the military), how they share power and how durable they might be. There is the question of possible turnover or ‘serial replacement’, as Steven Levitsky and Maria Victoria Murillo describe the problem of Latin American transitions that have stumbled with revised constitutions and lack of credible power-sharing agreements.<sup>7</sup>

That informal institutions matter, and weaker institutions are predictably unstable, are concepts now taken for granted.<sup>8</sup> The institutions that divide power and determine the structure of decision-making within a state may be enduring or ‘sticky’ if their inception negotiates with ‘veto-players’, or those segments or actors within society who have the power and interest to reject or manipulate the rules.<sup>9</sup>

All of these concepts in the study of institutions, state-building and transition lead us to consider how the conditions of rule-making have lasting consequences. But we must also keep in mind that institutional origins and pathways can be fluid, operating in a larger regional and international sphere of demands for change and protection, and these new institutions will have their own motivating factors, which may be challenged and defeated

<sup>7</sup> Steven Levitsky and Maria Victoria Murillo, ‘Building Institutions on Weak Foundations’, *Journal of Democracy* 24/2 (2013), pp. 93–107 at p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> See the early arguments establishing weak and informal institutions and their role in transitions in work by Guillermo O’Donnell. See especially O’Donnell, ‘On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Post-Communist Countries’, *World Development* 21 (1993), pp. 1355–69. O’Donnell, ‘Delegative Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1994), pp. 55–69. O’Donnell, ‘Illusions About Consolidation’, *Journal of Democracy* 7 (1996), pp. 34–51.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on institutional design and origin relies on work by Paul Pierson. See, for example, Pierson, ‘The Limits of Design: Explaining Institutional Origins and Design’, *Governance* 13 (2000), pp. 475–99. Later debates within institutionalist approaches (historical, sociological and rational choice models) have centred on how change occurs and how agency can be attributed. On the concept of ‘stickiness’, see James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, ‘A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change’, in Mahoney and Thelen (eds), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–37.



down the road.<sup>10</sup> Ideas about foreign threats and necessary security, appropriate intervention, and even who is a citizen and what privacy a citizen deserves are all new discursive territory in much of the GCC.

When a preponderance of power and resources is devoted to one aspect of state-building, we should expect a new kind of institutional framework to emerge, and with it new ways political actors engage and confront one another. Further, the process of building new institutions, rules for an economy and a state is precarious when it is constructed or manipulated by the military.<sup>11</sup> One can argue that the growing power of a military, or elements of militarisation controlled in a more centralised state autocracy, are a predictor of future battles between state and society as the rule-making process expands, by force or by negotiation.

Secondly, we have better conceptual guides in the literature in comparative politics and political economy to deal with the analysis of informal institutions. We need better empirical studies of how elites function in policy making inside and outside of state institutions. We need a study of networks, of the modern *majilis* and of the complex citizen/resident divide emerging in the Gulf states. Whether voters, citizens or mere residents, these are *political communities* with interests that will impact the foreign policy and the survival of the GCC regimes. Energy industry groups (including a nuclear power industry with rapidly growing influence), free zone banking and investor communities (including state-owned investment vehicles and private funds), the state security apparatus, members of transnational communities and the power of organising labour should not be underestimated. Traditional sources of civil society organisation are not entirely absent, though they face regime scrutiny.

The foreign policy literature on elites and decision-making in the GCC is pessimistic in its appraisal of multiple sources of informal influence, whether sourced from regime elites, business or civil society groups. Baabood argues:

In the GCC states, the trend has been that most of the policy makers are from the ruling families or from the most trusted ruling class. This is particularly so in foreign policy making and in the post of their foreign ministers. Ambassadorships and top diplomatic posts are usually used as rewards to the most trusted individuals and, in most cases, have a tribal, or family basis.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a theoretical discussion of capturing agency and possibilities for change in institutions, see Stephen Bell, 'Do We Really Need a New "Constructivist Institutionalism" to Explain Institutional Change?', *British Journal of Political Science* 41 (2011), pp. 883–906. Bell argues that constructivist institutional approaches may not be capturing more than historical institutionalism sets to explain. There is still room for theoretical exploration in the role of ideas in institutions and, specifically, informal institutions as mechanisms for policy choice and execution.

<sup>11</sup> The literature on the military role in institutionalisation processes, mostly from the Latin American case perspective, is vast. See, for example, J. Samuel Valenzuela, 'Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process, and Facilitating Conditions', in Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell and J. Samuel Valenzuela (eds), *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 57–104. See also Frances Hagopian, '"Democracy by Undemocratic Means"? Elites, Political Pacts, and Regime Transition in Brazil', *Comparative Political Studies* 23 (1990), pp. 147–70.

<sup>12</sup> Abdulla Baabood, 'Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU', *Review of International Affairs* 3/2 (2003), pp. 254–82 at p. 266.

But after the 2011 Arab uprisings and the massive investment flows and migration to the GCC, there must be a re-evaluation of this argument. Our frameworks for foreign policy analysis should shift in order to make room for these variables to show up on the analytic radars. Particularly in the UAE and Qatar now, there are leadership shifts and reshuffling of ministries and portfolios with significant resources. These changes create powerful interests capable of redirecting and positioning foreign policy for years to come.

## Case Examples from the UAE and Qatar: Explaining New Foreign Policy Interventions

In a working paper with the Middle East Centre, I have argued that Qatar and the UAE are ‘emerging interventionists’<sup>13</sup> in regional conflicts because of an opening in the structure of the global political economy – an influx of capital from natural resource wealth at a moment of transition, particularly in waning American hegemony within the Middle East. Combining this with distinct domestic leadership transitions and a process of state-building different from that of other GCC states, Qatar and the UAE in the 2000s have more opportunities to build a foreign policy portfolio backed with military capacity. The domestic constraints and interests in the two states are distinct, yet their trajectories into regional leadership roles are converging.

The UAE is institutionalising towards the centre – that is to say, the federal state of Abu Dhabi is generating a military-industrial centre through its private and regular armies, its nuclear and renewable energy programmes, and its wealth and capacity to invest. This generates federal tensions that should constrain, or at least inform, foreign policy. Qatar seems to be ideologically fixated on independence (or rebellion) from the GCC, with policy formulation somewhat stalled since the summer of 2013. The foreign constituencies now in residence in Doha are experienced political actors. We should expect to see lobbying and stratification within the Qatari leadership to recalibrate or articulate the regime’s position vis-à-vis regional conflict. To predict further transformation in these cases, the foreign policy analysis framework needs to be malleable, but very focused on the empirical details of ongoing state formation and diverse domestic constituencies.

The UAE and Qatar experienced political and economic transformations by the mid-2000s for at least four reasons. First, the emerging market trend in foreign investment of the mid-1990s spurred the liberalisation of bank sectors and investments in infrastructure.

Secondly, the passing of responsibilities to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan in the late 1990s from Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan in the UAE, and the overthrow of Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al Thani in Qatar by his son Sheikh Hamad in 1995, allowed the emergence of a new generation of leaders who were willing to increase government expenditure and engage foreign policy more actively. Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan passed away in 2004, and major investments in the UAE in the bank sector and energy sectors also occurred in this period, though not all related to Zayed’s death. The emergence of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum in Dubai as ruler in 2006 heralded the property and investment boom there. With Mohammed bin Rashid in Dubai and Khalifa bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi, a new generational era of growth, liberalisation and security interests emerged in the UAE.

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<sup>13</sup> Young, *Emerging Interventionists of the GCC*.

Thirdly, the commodities boom of the 2000s boosted GDP across the GCC and created a wave of wealth for the state. The timing of the massive creation of wealth of the 2000s coinciding with a new generation of leadership in the UAE and Qatar encouraged new statecraft to emerge. The first oil boom of the 1970s was too early for these small states to absorb institutionally and to project beyond their subregional base.

The fourth factor that has transformed the foreign policy of these two states is access to military equipment and training from the world's leading suppliers. The facility of arms procurement is a product of a post-Cold War hypermarket of weapons from states that see little conflict in political disengagement from the Middle East while simultaneously arming its governments.

For the UAE, the rationale for intervention is less about the accumulation of new wealth and power, and more focused on preserving domestic stability and economic growth in a turbulent region. The openness of the UAE to foreign investment hinges not only on its difference from its peers (namely, Riyadh and Doha as regional financial centres) and on its accessibility during regional upheaval, but also on its relative safety. This is a critical balance that may become more difficult for the UAE to sustain given Qatar's more aggressive foreign policy. The UAE may also become more aggressive as its leadership prepares for the successor to Sheikh Khalifa al Nahyan.

## Conclusion

Looking back to the summer of 2001, foreign policy analysts of the Gulf predicted new alliances at both the international and regional levels, as Donald Rumsfeld articulated the 'pivot to Asia' of US military strategy in March that year. The GCC states were focused on regional security cooperation and linking regional ideational movements and collective grievances to state security (especially the Palestinian–Israeli peace process).<sup>14</sup> Qatar settled border disputes with both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The regional middle powers of Iran and Iraq loomed as threats to GCC collective security, and the US presence after the first Gulf War seemed to complicate rather than ease tensions. Six months later, the world had changed. Now in 2014–15 we are back in a similar structural and regional position in the GCC to that of early 2001. Regional security cooperation is on the table, as is a concern for regional conflict and collective grievance. The USA is similarly disengaged or at least not a primary major power directing policy goals.

What is different? I would argue that the domestic politics of the GCC states and their processes of institutionalisation and decision-making have changed dramatically in thirteen years. We still see the shell of the authoritarian family regime, but the complex reality of military capability, economic resources and market sophistication (if not stratification in places like the UAE), as well as global recognition of GCC states, is new. 'Stateness' has amplified, and with it more volatile and individualised GCC state foreign policy agendas are capable of transforming both regional and international politics.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Ed Blanche, 'GCC Security: New Alliances in the Making?', *Middle East* 312 (2001), pp. 4–8.

<sup>15</sup> That is, at the time of the workshop where these papers were presented.

Therefore, the task of foreign policy analysis is to be flexible, to exercise both inside and outside investigations into the drivers of GCC foreign policy. The next decade is likely to see more divergence among GCC states' foreign policies and less cooperation, as constituencies stratify and articulate different economic interests and bases of domestic support. The papers from our workshop, 'Mapping GCC Foreign Policy', represent efforts to examine these changes from multiple analytical frames, including domestic politics, regional dynamics and the forces of the international system and global economy. The work is in its early stages, as the foreign and security policies of the GCC states continue to change, and to surprise analysts and the policy community.



## GCC Foreign Policy: From the Iran-Iraq War to the Arab Awakening

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Though the policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are not coordinated centrally by the Council's secretariat and no treaty binds the external conduct of its member-states, the GCC has nevertheless been recognised as a regional bloc in its own right and empowered to act on behalf of its members in a number of arenas, including negotiating economic agreements with other states and indeed regional blocs (such as the EU), and forming common diplomatic platforms over a range of regional security matters. The GCC, moreover, has emerged as the Middle East's most important regional organisation and the role it and some of its six members now play in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has credited the parties as a whole with a new status in the wider region and increasingly also internationally. Due to their considerable wealth and purchasing power, several GCC states – Saudi Arabia as a Group of Twenty (G20) member, for example, and Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as 'bankrollers' and project financiers and therefore in possession of considerable soft power – have also gained a much greater international footprint. The GCC as a bloc is at the very least a financial force to be reckoned with, and one with considerable soft power reserves.

It should be noted that the GCC was forged in the raging fires of the Iran–Iraq War and, as such, it is conflict which shaped the conditions for the emergence of this first subregional organisation in the MENA regional system. The GCC is, as a consequence, above all a security organisation, bringing seemingly weak and vulnerable like-minded states under a single protective umbrella.<sup>1</sup> In spite of its loosely framed common security structure, over time the GCC's external security blanket has been extended to provide cover for the internal security of its ruling elites as well. Thus, while its Peninsula Shield Force may be still be more of a shell than a defensive blanket, its existence enables the GCC states to act in defence of each other and, if need be, against external threats. Despite its many structural weaknesses, then – small native populations, the presence of large expatriate communities, weak security and military structures, the varied size of its member-states, the geographical domination of one over the other five parties, and collective exposure to hydrocarbons price fluctuations, amongst others – the GCC has survived and prospered. Its survival and development are arguably due to the inherent strengths of its member-states and their intuitive

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<sup>1</sup> Turki Al-Hamad, 'Imperfect Alliances: Will the Gulf Monarchies Work Together?', in Barry Rubin (ed.), *Crises in the Contemporary Persian Gulf* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 21–32.

responses to regional and subregional crises. Their similar regime types, the assuredness of their ruling families, the durability of their 'ruling bargain', and the elites' abilities to globalise without social dislocation have all helped the GCC to develop into an influential regional bloc since its birth in 1981, when its survival prospects were viewed as slim. Also, the GCC states' ability to negotiate close and durable security partnerships with the West, particularly the USA, has acted as a backstop for them, thus enabling them to take foreign policy initiatives more comfortably when pressed.

Thus, these countries have at times been compelled to act, particularly in crisis situations, but on other occasions have been encouraged to do so by other countries and indeed by such regional bodies as the Arab League – as in the case of Libya, Yemen and Syria in recent years. The pressure for the GCC to act on the regional and international stage has come at a cost, however. On the one hand, external (over-)reach has tested the internal cohesion of the GCC, particularly with regard to the Saudi drive to tighten the Council into a much more centralised union. And, on the other, the GCC states' willingness and ability individually to respond more fully to the external challenges and opportunities arising from the rapidly changing external environment have translated into a much more visible set of tensions in their bilateral relations. In a sense, the GCC states' greater external engagement has tested the strength of the organisation's internal unity.

To understand the GCC states' foreign policy conduct, we need to understand not only the nature of decision-making in these states but also the conditions under which decisions are being crafted.<sup>2</sup> So, for a fuller understanding of GCC states' foreign policies and GCC foreign policy therein, I would divide the analysis of this subregional bloc of monarchies into two distinct but related realms: first, the *drivers of foreign policy*; and secondly, the *context for foreign policy*, the arena in which foreign policy takes effect.

## Drivers of Foreign Policy

In terms of the *drivers of foreign policy* – its determinants – I would consider the following as the most salient elements. The first point to make relates to the conditions of state formation. In several of these states, particularly in the 'newer' ones (Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE), the way in which the tribal communities were forged into nation-states has left a direct security imprint on the resultant territorial state. In the case of Bahrain and the UAE, as a consequence, the resultant states are internally diverse and also potentially vulnerable to pressure. In the UAE, while foreign policy is processed in Abu Dhabi, the plurality of its sheikhdoms makes foreign policy a product of direct calculations amongst a group of rulers. The ruling elites' role conceptions are in turn shaped by the conditions of the territorial state's formation and are therefore subject to domestic pressures, which traditionally has led to fierce disputes as much as compromises on foreign policy priorities. The dominant elites tend to make a real effort to balance policy against the interests of the myriad of forces within the country, which at times tends to generate apparently contradictory policies. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in a country such as the UAE, which is a federation of families delineated along geographical lines: Dubai wants closer (economic and financial) links with Iran while Abu Dhabi prefers to put clear water between the UAE and the Islamic Republic. The sheikhs not only compete within the national space but also maintain their own external links and lines of patronage.

<sup>2</sup> See Steven Wright, 'Foreign Policy in the GCC States', in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. 72–93.

Also, as in every case a family (or ruling family offshoot) is in control the state's fortunes, these elites have become entangled with the (perceived) interests of the ruling establishment as a whole. Power elites, in other words, have projected themselves onto the state and as such states have internalised the interests of their elites as their own.

Secondly, because of the conditions of their birth, regime security is of paramount, and indeed overriding, importance to these states. So foreign policy is often formed in the context of calculations about regime security. Where regime security is seen to be under threat, regimes mobilise to counter the threat proactively. This tendency has been in evidence in the policies of Saudi Arabia since the 1979 Iranian revolution, but most emphatically since 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq war. In the 1980s the Kingdom directly aided the secular regime of Saddam Hussein to prevent its collapse against Iranian military and political pressure and at the same time compiled salafi coalitions to counter Tehran's growing influence in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. For Riyadh, also, the removal of Saddam Hussein was a strategic blunder which gave Iran – its geopolitical and ideological rival – unprecedented comparative advantage that the Kingdom would then have to try and counter itself. Threats to national security have mobilised the more powerful GCC members to act independently.

Thirdly, the GCC states as a whole face the problem of having small national populations and weak domestic bases for guaranteeing national security. As a result, they are unduly dependent on support from outside forces and countries, often from the West, but not exclusively. Thus, in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain Pakistani security forces have been actively deployed in defence of the regime and its control of the state; and in the UAE security contractors have been employed.

These countries have also managed to turn their vulnerability in this respect into a virtue by giving the West a credible and profitable stake in the security of their ruling regimes. Western military presence now cuts both ways: providing security for the monarchies and profitable contracts for the USA and its European allies. A symbiotic relationship has been formed in which the West's interests are tied to the prosperity of the GCC rulers.

Fourthly, the GCC states' unique domestic governance structures play their part in the shaping of foreign policy. Domestic governance structures and balance of forces at the elite level tend to determine and condition the foreign policy calculations of each GCC state differently. In Saudi Arabia, it is the relationship between the sons of Abdul Aziz that still matters and the role of al-Saud figures which directly affect the Kingdom's foreign policy choices. Institutions are of course important, such as the *ulema*, but it is the way in which individual princes mobilise the institutions of state which is significant. In Kuwait, by contrast, the executive's foreign policy initiatives have to be balanced against the positions articulated by members of its bumptious elected National Assembly. The 50 elected members of the parliament have a direct impact on the policy choices of the al-Sabahs and indeed the implementation of the country's foreign policy. The Assembly brings institutional authority to bear on the foreign policy choices of Kuwait on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A good example of the Assembly's influence over foreign policy was provided in April 2014. In its meeting of 3 April the five-member foreign affairs committee of the National Assembly rejected by a vote of 3–2 the implementation of the carefully negotiated 2012 GCC security pact, calling it unconstitutional. The Kuwaiti government had already approved the treaty, which has been ratified by the other five GCC member-states. Indeed, due to continuing disquiet about the pact in the Assembly the final decision has been left to the next parliament. *Kuwait Times*, 4 April 2014.

In Oman, in aiming to generate a consensual policy, the Sultan manages foreign policy through wide consultation at the elite and elected-elite levels. In the UAE, however, it is Abu Dhabi that tends to hold sway, but even the all-powerful al-Nahyans still have to show sensitivity to the interests of at least some of the other sheikhdoms within the Federation.

Fifthly, and linked to the above, is the critical role that leadership plays in the process of foreign policy making. We have seen in the case of Qatar how the change of emir in 1995 transformed the country into a forward-looking and more extrovert monarchy. Changes are in the air since 2013 and the accession to the throne of Sheikh Tamim. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia too new leaders have brought with them new approaches to policy making and also a more assertive foreign policy.

Finally, we must note the great (structural) impact that globalisation has had on the place of the GCC countries in the world – in the new global division of labour – and therefore on their outlooks and the determination of their policies. Thanks to globalisation, this group of countries are perhaps the most interdependent of any in the region. The GCC states' globalisation, resulting from their hydrocarbons wealth – making them at once outward looking and engaged with global forces – has been further fuelled by these countries' strong financial muscle (they are cash rich, have huge investment portfolios, and also have control of powerful sovereign wealth funds with involvement in assets and business across the planet), and augmented by their extraordinary information and communications technology (ICT) penetration. The KOF Index of Globalization ranks four of the GCC states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE) in the top 50 most globalised countries in the world, and in terms of social globalisation the UAE and Kuwait lead the region.<sup>4</sup> ICT penetration is high and in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE stands at over 85 per cent; Oman's is at 66 per cent and Saudi Arabia's stands at 60 per cent. Compared with ICT penetration in the rest of the region – Israel (76 per cent), Lebanon (67 per cent), Egypt (48 per cent), Tunisia (45 per cent), Jordan (45 per cent), Iran (28 per cent), Libya (22 per cent) and Algeria (17 per cent) – the GCC as a bloc leads the way.<sup>5</sup> The GCC's complex globalisation has set the Council members apart from the rest of the region, has encouraged deeper cross-border relations, and has given these societies and their elites the ability to seize opportunities presented outside of the region and the confidence to engage with them more fully. The Council members are more savvy and aware, and have used their globalisation to create effective networked societies, which has given them additional soft power. In some cases, global media networks (al Jazeera in particular) have been created to underpin the state's external presence.

But at the same time, globalisation has left the ruling establishments domestically exposed to external currents, be these demographic (due to rapid expansion of immigrant labour), financial or through exposure to new social media usage by their nationals. The post-2008 financial crises in Europe and the USA, for example, directly affected the GCC states more than any other group of countries in Asia or Latin America; and ICTs have not only helped to decentralise identity formation, challenging the dominant state/elite narrative, but also

<sup>4</sup> See Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Dynamics of Change in the Persian Gulf: Political Economy, War and Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Data compiled from *Internet World Stats 2013*. Available at [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com) (accessed 10 March 2015).



provided the means for the population to question state loyalties and even policies.<sup>6</sup> Intranet communications systems – Facebook, blogs, Tweets, short message service (SMS) messages etc. – are used intensely to question state policies and challenge foreign policy narratives. Globalisation, then, is also having an unsettling impact on the GCC states' foreign pursuits, despite also having enabled them to punch above their geographic or demographic weight.

## Context for Foreign Policy

Having considered the broad determinants of GCC foreign policy, it is now prudent to review the broader context in which foreign policy has been taking shape. What role have environmental factors played in shaping the GCC states' foreign relations? I would argue that these vulnerable countries have had to function (and sometimes even to struggle to survive) in extremely difficult conditions.

The GCC's primary concern in the 1980s was the Iran–Iraq War: how to immunise themselves from its effects, how to prevent it from spreading beyond the borders of the warring parties, how to contain the larger and most populous party (Iran) without aggravating it, and how to support Iraq's war effort without empowering it too much to interfere in their affairs. From the start of the 1990s the Council members' core priority was how to deal with a recalcitrant and revisionist Iraq bent on the use of force against them, and how to contain the growing threat of terrorism (from Iranian-backed forces as much as from a new breed of terrorists attached to the al-Qaeda network). The 2000s gave birth to the 'war on terror', America's more intrusive focus on the region in response to 9/11, and, ultimately, the use of force by the USA in their immediate neighbourhood, amongst other security crises.

Patently, then, regional volatility has brought to the fore many powerful geopolitical forces for these states to contend with, let alone manage. While in the early days of its formation the GCC's main task was to ameliorate the impact of the external geopolitical pressures on its states and societies – essentially, those of revolution and war – I would argue that from the second half of the 1990s, and often in response to the changing regional conditions, one detects a change of tempo in these countries' foreign policies. With the change in tempo, arguably, has come a greater degree of proactivity. Nowhere is this more visible than since the 2003 Iraq war, which was itself a direct product of 9/11 and the pressures which resulted from the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on US soil on at least two GCC states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) whose citizens had led the attacks.

There are, therefore, a number of critical contextual forces which should be considered as factors shaping the GCC states' foreign policies. The first is the manifold pressures on the Arab region arising from the dynamic changes following the Iranian revolution in 1979 and resultant war (1980–8), leading to a fragmenting Arab order in the 1980s, which in the 1990s resulted in the polarisation and ultimate implosion of the Arab order.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabah and Mohammed al-Mutawa (eds), *Globalization and the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Noble, 'From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? Regional Pressures and Constraints', in Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (eds), *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 67–165.

Added to these structural tensions are the demise of Iraq as a regional actor, the new regional power dynamics arising from the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq, and the subsequent rise of Iran.<sup>8</sup> Loss of Iraq as a geopolitical counterweight to Iran has had an enduring effect on several GCC states, most notably Saudi Arabia, which sees Iran as a clear and present danger to the prosperity of the GCC under Saudi leadership.

The complex geopolitical conditions arising from the Arab Awakening have brought their own tensions since 2011, causing rifts in the GCC bloc as the Arab region has further fractured. Added to the above is the geopolitical impact of 'systemic shift' on the GCC states' relations with the major powers, most notably with the USA (and by extension its Western allies), as they rediscover Asia.

Despite their many similarities, the GCC states are not alike; their different leaderships, social bases and geography have dictated their own conditions on these countries' foreign policies, and therefore, on many occasions, have pushed them in different directions. It could thus be argued that despite its organisational paraphernalia the GCC has never been a unified bloc representative of all its members, and despite its members having held surprisingly close positions on a wide range of regional (and international) issues since its birth – the threat of Iran, the place of Iraq in the Arab order, the Shi'a rising, the stability of Yemen, the Arab–Israeli conflict, the threat of al-Qaeda – their interests have also diverged quite spectacularly on numerous occasions. A few examples would suffice to illustrate the point: In the midst of the Arab transition crisis came the announcement of the breakthrough between Iran and the USA, which appeared to have been orchestrated by Oman; Kuwait has taken great strides towards reaching accommodation with the Shi'a-led regime in Iraq; and Qatar has not only pursued links with Israel but also built bridges with the Taliban in Afghanistan, to say nothing of Doha's bold policy moves in the Arab revolts.

## Changing Regional Dynamics and the GCC

In terms of a wider canvas for understanding the GCC states' foreign policy conduct, then, one should note the dramatic changes at the strategic level which have brought in their wake unpredictable and unsettling regional changes following the 'oil bonanza decade' of the 1970s. A better sense of this broader canvas will help put in context the GCC states' involvement in regional theatres and international forums.

It was noted earlier that by the end of the 1980s the Arab order had fragmented, and that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait had caused deep polarisation of the Arab region. As a direct result of these developments power became more diffuse in the Arab world and, thanks to the protection that the GCC as an organisation had provided for the small Gulf Arab states, some of these states began flexing their diplomatic muscles in unprecedented ways. Furthermore, they also began to do so well beyond their own immediate neighbourhood. Their use of soft power as an effective tool in their foreign policy mix became increasingly marked in the 2000s, and by the end of that decade the cash-rich countries of Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE had become influential regional actors in their own right. Qatar and the UAE became inter-

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Kostiner, 'GCC Perceptions of Collective Security in the Post-Saddam Era', in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. 94–119.

ventionists and Kuwait fulfilled the role of mediator and donor. It should be noted, however, that in the 1970s Kuwait and the UAE were already building a reputation as peace-builders and humanitarian interventionists. Qatar and Oman also joined them as champions of humanitarian diplomacy in the 1980s, thus providing a critical mass for positive intervention as the GCC states then characterised their role in the wider region.

The largest GCC country, Saudi Arabia, had also discovered the virtues of action in the aftermath of the Iraq war, and in pursuit of 'hegemonic stability' played an active role in the nascent Middle East Cold War, which pitted it against Iran and Tehran's myriad of (state and non-state) Arab allies. Until the early 2000s, arguably, it was relatively easy for the GCC states to coalesce around core issues, despite some divergences in foreign policy. So, while Muscat and Tehran enjoyed cordial relations, the GCC as a group held a common line over the UAE's territorial dispute with Iran, for example, and Oman's good links with Iran did not prejudice intra-GCC relations. If anything, Muscat's access to the Iranian leadership provided a necessary safety valve for checking the potentially harmful escalation in tensions between Iran and the rest of the GCC states.

Furthermore, the GCC states all held a general line over quite a varied range of issues, which included Iraq under sanctions, Iran's regional role, Palestine and the peace process, and the importance of non-intervention in sovereign states' internal affairs. The GCC states all feared Iran's maritime presence and also its nuclear programme and they all drew ever closer to the USA for security, just as they were building lucrative trade and investment links with the emerging powers of Asia, such as China and India, which were not in any sense in the US orbit of influence.

But from 2003, the situation between the GCC states began to change quite dramatically. First, there was no GCC consensus over the Iraq war: some GCC countries of course welcomed the departure of Saddam Hussein as a price worth paying for the war, while others expressed deep concern about the illegality of the war, and also its consequences for the subregion's balance of power. Riyadh, thus, was most vocal in opposing the war because it saw in the fall of the Ba'th regime a further empowerment of Iran and an extension of its influence into this important Arab country; yet Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE provided logistical support for the US-led invasion. Secondly, sectarianism had reared its head to affect state-level perceptions and also to politicise public discourses about 'the other'. Regimes had to contain the fallout from sectarianism but at the same time wanted to realise the opportunities presented to capitalise on a Sunni/Shi'a rift for domestic legitimacy and also for power projection. Thirdly, relations between the GCC states themselves were evolving fast. Just as border disputes between the parties were waning, interest in each other's domestic affairs began to grow. So, in this respect, Saudi Arabia was very much focused on Qatar's growing unilateralism, Kuwait's democratic struggles and of course the stability of Bahrain, while the UAE showed a keen interest in Oman's domestic politics in search of answers for Muscat's close ties with Iran.

Fourthly, while the period 2003–10 was characterised by the GCC's efforts to contain Iran and seek protection from the crisis in Iraq – in other words, more local issues – the GCC countries were also focused on the maximisation of capital accumulation, which was happening at an unprecedented rate. By the end of 2010 high oil prices (of over \$100/barrel) had generated in the region of \$3.5 trillion in revenue for these countries and had allowed

them to amass over \$2.0 trillion in gross foreign assets. Business had become the main driver of their policies and in this they felt more comfortable charting their own paths externally. The drive for capital accumulation and investment, however, also increased rivalry between these states. So Dubai's losses in the 2008/9 financial crisis translated into major gains for Doha as the new hub of innovation in the Gulf. The GCC states' gazes began to diverge, in other words, and slowly but surely so did their interests. Their globalisation created the late rentier condition, which in turn enhanced the autonomy of the State and also that of its masters.

Thus, by the start of the 2010s, and before the Arab revolts, most of the GCC countries were projecting power and influence in virtually every corner of the MENA subsystem: Qatar was in conversation with Israel, directly involved in Palestinian politics, and also a mediator in the Sudan and acting as a partner for the Maghreb states; Saudi Arabia was pursuing close links with Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, at the same as being deeply involved in the Yemen and the facing Red Sea states of Eritrea and Ethiopia; Oman was in close touch with Iran; and the UAE was involved in efforts to build bridges with post-Ba'th Iraq. In many places the GCC states were trying to stamp their own mark on regional affairs, and often successfully, but frequently in an uncoordinated manner. They were exerting influence apart and not as part of a unified strategy: It was arguably only a matter of place (and time) before their divergent paths would cross in a more hostile fashion.

As already stated, the Arab Awakening provided a new strategic context for the GCC states to extend their reach into the domestic arena of the larger and more strategically placed Arab countries.<sup>9</sup> At first the Council members seemed to share a common agenda: contain the fallout from the loss of Arab allies, and capitalise on the momentum to undo the hostile Arab regimes. For some – Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait – the domestic effects of the Arab Awakening also had to be contained. Their approaches to managing domestic discontent proved to be very different too: Bahrain called in the cavalry from Saudi Arabia and the UAE and then launched a campaign of national dialogue, while Oman removed corrupted echelons of power and followed this with a new round of reforms, and Kuwait remained loyal to the people's constitutional rights and attempted to negotiate the political crisis through elections and changes of government.

By the end of 2011 the GCC states were deeply involved in the Arab transition states. But, in the fast-changing geopolitical landscape of the Arab Awakening, the Council members soon found themselves swimming in currents well beyond their control. Some GCC states were, for all intents and purposes, leading a counter-revolutionary campaign against the same emerging governments that were being supported by other GCC members. The tension arising from the unpredictability of the transition was nowhere more visible than in Egypt, where Saudi Arabia and Qatar stood at the opposite ends of Egypt's political spectrum. But it was in Syria where their diplomatic rift was magnified, despite the fact that both countries supported the same objective of the removal from power of Bashar al-Assad's regime. In short, for the first time in the Council's history, the complex dynamics resulting from regional changes – from the Arab uprisings – divided the GCC countries along very different axes. In effect, a new axis of interest had appeared on the GCC landscape, causing

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<sup>9</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (Durham: Al-Sabah Paper No. 3, October 2012).



a rift between the anti-*Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular) and the rest. The latter were also divided between those who saw some utility in the utilisation of the *Ikhwan* in their own domestic struggles (as in al-Khalifa's struggles against the politicised Shi'a) and those who tolerated (Oman and Qatar) or supported (Qatar) the Brotherhood.

Responses to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (and elsewhere in the transition countries) became the fault line in the GCC.<sup>10</sup> For several GCC countries with a track record of Islamist activism in their countries, the Brotherhood was perceived as an invigorated political force able to challenge the ruling establishment. With national security being the prime driver of the GCC countries' foreign policies, in Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE the spectre of the Brotherhood mobilising against the ruling establishments brought a strong backlash against the Morsi government in Egypt. Ironically, the more distance was placed between these GCC countries and Egypt the closer became Doha's embrace of Morsi's government. In practice, Qatar emerged as the financial guarantor of the Islamist government in Egypt and by extension a supporter of the Brotherhood's broadening networks in the GCC.

Ironically, until its last breath, the Islamist-led Egyptian government was very careful to cultivate cordial, if not close links, with the GCC as a bloc, and President Morsi had gone out of his way to emphasise the importance of close economic, political and diplomatic ties between the GCC and Egypt. But Morsi's efforts came to naught as the Brotherhood as a movement appeared to gain strength in some GCC countries. The fissure amongst the GCC countries, then, has largely occurred because of the apparent existential threat that the Brotherhood had come to pose. Foreign policy had become a domestic problem.

### Assertiveness versus Defensive Activism

As a consequence of war, revolution and invasion in the period following the tumultuous events of 1979, the MENA region as a whole has erupted into multiple theatres of conflict, and as a consequence the large Arab order at the heart of the regional system has weakened, fragmented, polarised and eventually sub-regionalised. It was a combination of regional fragmentation, polarisation and rapid globalisation (plus capital accumulation) which facilitated the GCC's 'breakout' as an influential MENA actor.

But since 2003 the smaller GCC states in particular have come out of their shell and have sought a far more interventionist regional role. The actions of the smaller GCC states have not always sat comfortably with the priorities and interests of the dominant GCC state, namely Saudi Arabia; that state itself has also become much more proactive and assertive (in a defensive fashion) since the crisis of 9/11, which exposed the Kingdom to unprecedented and unexpected pressure from its closest Western ally. The crisis of State in the three most significant Arab countries (that is, republics) – Iraq, Egypt and Syria – in less than ten years (between 2003 and 2011) arguably mobilised the more 'globalised' GCC states into action, on occasion defensively but increasingly offensively. But their distinctive approaches have in turn created a crisis within the Council itself.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Alain Gresh, 'Gulf Cools towards Muslim Brothers', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2 November 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Marwan Kabalan, 'Can the Kuwait Summit Prevent another Arab Cold War?', *al Jazeera*, 24 March 2014.

We have therefore seen an increasing diversity in GCC foreign policies and the member-states' role conception. Some GCC states now see themselves as assertive actors in the regional and international arenas, while others continue to hold on to the median line as intermediaries and peace-brokers. As a result, the GCC itself may arguably be increasingly displaying the characteristics of the subsystem as a whole – and in this becoming 'multipolar' itself. The GCC's multipolarity has been tested, if not intensified, by the Arab revolts and the role that the Islamist forces have come to play in these uprisings. For some GCC states the rise of the *Ikhwan* is a direct threat and one bolstered by one of their own, leading them to take public action against Qatar.<sup>12</sup> Some thirty-plus years after its birth the Council must face the crisis generated by turmoil in the Arab world. The Arab Awakening has brought forward the timetable for facing difficult decisions, and one more than any other looms large: whether to push for a more closely knit community (in a 'union') for the collective security of its members, or to cultivate the strengthening of a 'federated' closed club that can boast of good relations with all its neighbours precisely because it has multiple channels of influence in place. It can only ensure the latter if its members feel confident enough to pursue their own policies as part of a diverse but united club, but a multipolar club bereft of a central axis could be detrimental to the GCC's long-term aspiration of becoming a fully integrated political bloc. It is in this aspect that the 'unionisation' of the GCC presents itself. As it approaches middle age the GCC has to face some critical decisions about its future role in the region and in the broader international order, but ironically it can only do so once (some) stability has been restored to the Arab region. Yet everything that its members seem to be doing is prolonging transition and therefore further delaying the prospects of regional stability and with it the day of decision within the GCC itself. Regional dynamism has entrenched change as a permanent structure<sup>13</sup> in which the GCC now plays a leading if not *the* leading part.

<sup>12</sup> Policy Analysis Unit, *Recalling GCC Ambassadors from Doha: A Background and Future Predictions* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, March 2014).

<sup>13</sup> For a rich discussion of the concept of 'change' as a critical component of analysis of the MENA regional system, see Bahgat Korany, 'Looking at the Middle East Differently: An Alternative Conceptual Lens', in Bahgat Korany (ed.), *The Changing Middle East: A New Look at Regional Dynamics* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), pp. 7–42.

## Qatar's Strained Gulf Relationships

### David B. Roberts

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Qatar and its immediate neighbours Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are suffused with broad religious, cultural, ethnic, social, political and economic commonalities along with families and tribes overlapping state boundaries. But still these states, along with their other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies Kuwait and Oman, can be acutely if not curiously argumentative.

Historically speaking, Qatari relations with the Emirates have been mixed, while they have been outright fractious with Bahrain, centred on competing territorial claims that were only settled in 2001 after the International Court of Justice's longest and most complex adjudication.<sup>1</sup> Saudi relations have been complicated by the overbearing size and power of the Saudi state, which has typically seen Qatar as but another province; an approach that caused serious friction from the late 1980s onwards when an emerging elite in Qatar sought to recast bilateral relations entirely.<sup>2</sup>

The withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini ambassadors from Doha on 5 March 2014 is one of the latest and worst breaks in regional relations in recent times.<sup>3</sup> The return of these ambassadors in late November the same year came amid a predictable flurry of exhortations as to the importance of GCC unity and fraternal understanding, and the fundamental importance of the GCC itself. Nevertheless, flowery rhetoric aside, given the apparent depth of the breakdown and the GCC's history of temporary surges of unity when faced with external difficulties, it remains to be seen whether this rapprochement can last or become the start of genuinely meaningful cooperation.

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<sup>1</sup> Krista E. Wiegand, 'Bahrain, Qatar, and the Hawar Islands: Resolution of a Gulf Territorial Dispute', *Middle East Journal* 66/1 (2012).

<sup>2</sup> David B. Roberts, 'Examining Qatar-Saudi Relations', *RUSI Newsbrief* 32/2 (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Simeon Kerr, 'Diplomatic Crisis as Gulf States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar', *Financial Times*, 5 March 2014.

There was a variety of causes of this breakdown, but one issue in particular dominates discussions: Qatar's atypical interaction with and support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, though the Brotherhood has also played historically important roles in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and has been overtly supported by their monarchies in the past, today Qatar stands isolated in its approach.

## Qatar and the Brotherhood

Despite this topic being of pivotal interest in understanding not only this iteration of intra-Gulf difficulties, but also how and why Qatar has so assiduously supported a range of typically Islamist groups during the Arab Spring, it has received little in-depth analysis.<sup>4</sup> While many articles in the media note that, for example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi – one of the most important Muslim Brotherhood spiritual guides – left Egypt for Qatar in the early 1960s, few note the scale of the influx of Brotherhood members to Qatar (or elsewhere in the Gulf) around that time.<sup>5</sup>

Abdul-Badi Saqr arrived in 1954 from Egypt to be the director of education and subsequently run the Qatar National Library after being recommended by a prominent Cairo-based religious sheikh.<sup>6</sup> Under his leadership, an influx of Brotherhood teachers 'stamped the education system with their Islamic ideology',<sup>7</sup> mirroring what was happening in Saudi Arabia and the UAE at the same time.<sup>8</sup> When Sheikh Khalifah bin Hamad al Thani (r. 1972–95) took charge of the education portfolio in 1956–7 he was concerned about increasing Brotherhood domination of education, so he sacked Saqr and replaced him with the Arab nationalist Syrian Dr Abdullah Abd al Daim. However, he did not last more than a year thanks to the pressures of the British resident, keen to evict such an ardent pan-Arabist. Even while trying to avoid the domination of Brotherhood or pan-Arab thinkers, Khalifah still oversaw significant recruitment from Cairo. In 1960, the head of Islamic Sciences at the Education Department, Abdullah bin Tukri al Subai, went to the al Azhar to recruit teachers and thinkers. Ahmed al Assal arrived in Qatar in 1960 and taught in schools, lectured in mosques and helped form Brotherhood groups. Abdel-Moaz al Sattar – Hassan al Banna's personal emissary to Palestine in 1946 – came to Qatar to be a school inspector and then director of Islamic Sciences at the Ministry of Education, and co-authored numerous textbooks for the nascent Qatari school system in the early 1960s. Dr Kemal Naji took on various roles including those of director of education from 1964 to 1979, head of the publication committee and

<sup>4</sup> My articles for *Survival* and *Middle East Policy* are the extent of academia's recent dealings with the topic. David B. Roberts, 'Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?', *Middle East Policy* 21/3 (2014). Roberts, 'Qatar and the Brotherhood', *Survival* 56/ 4 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Haykel's short brief on Qatar notes some of these issues. Bernard Haykel, 'Qatar and Islamism', *NOREF Policy Brief*, February 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Juma Kobaisi, *The Development of Education in Qatar, 1950–1977*, PhD thesis, Durham University, 1979, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of the influence of the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). For an outline of the role of the Brotherhood in the UAE see Mansour al Nukedan, 'Al Ikhwan Al Muslimeen Fee Al Imarat al Tmadud Wa al Inhisar' ['The Muslim Brotherhood in the Emirates in Expansion and Decline'], *al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre*, 16 September 2013. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/pwjpbqc> (accessed 10 March 2015).



foreign cultural relations advisor of the Ministry of Education. Yusuf al-Qaradawi left Egypt for Qatar in 1961. Initially he ran a revamped religious institute, and subsequently established and became dean of the College of Sharia at Qatar University. Today he is widely considered to be one of the most influential and well-known Brotherhood intellectuals; a facet helped since the mid-1990s by his popular talk show *al Shari'a wal Hayaa* ('Islamic Law and Life'), broadcast on al Jazeera, which afforded him a large pan-regional audience.

Despite this historic saturation of the education system with Brotherhood teachers and technocrats, few would suggest that modern foreign policy decisions result from Qataris being inculcated with the Brotherhood ideology. The lack of apparent transference stems from a variety of factors.

Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar is a country where the Wahhabi creed of salafi, Hanbali Islam, prevails. Qatar's ruling family hail from the same central Arabian tribal group (the Bani Tamim) as Wahhabism's founder, Muhammad al Wahhab, and Qatar's leaders have long adhered to its scriptures. Even in the twenty-first century when nothing about Qatar's orientation or policies chimes with a typical understanding of the puritanical Wahhabi creed, the national mosque opened in 2012 was named after al Wahhab himself. Though the state overall was receptive to the influx of the Brotherhood, the ground for proselytising was not so accepting.

Indeed, the Brotherhood is 'barely [actively] involved in Qatari domestic affairs'.<sup>9</sup> In distinct contrast to Saudi Arabia, Qatar has limited the institutional opportunities available for religious scholars of any description to exert influence domestically.<sup>10</sup> Religious schools as founded by Qaradawi in 1961 remain niche and in 2008–9 taught only 257 students, the vast majority of whom were not Qatari.<sup>11</sup> Institutionally not entertaining the notion of religious influence on politics, there is no office of grand mufti in Qatar, and the Ministry for Islamic Affairs and Endowments was established only in 1993.<sup>12 13</sup>

The Brotherhood's lack of penetration in Qatar is also explained by its inability to perform a variety of its usual social functions. Running schools or medical clinics – typical Brotherhood activities elsewhere in the Middle East – are popular, but inevitably undercut the state's legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> However, in 1972 when Khalifah bin Hamad al Thani took over seamlessly from Ahmed bin Ali al Thani, he augmented his wider legitimacy and diversified his support from nigh-on exclusively focused on the al Thani to a far wider base. He did this through a budget splurge creating jobs, building houses, augmenting pensions and increasing wages, leaving no need for similar Brotherhood activities.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Azem, 'Qatar's Ties with the Muslim Brotherhood Affect Entire Region', *National*, 18 May 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Birol Baskan and Steven Wright, 'Seeds of Change: Comparing State–Religion Relations in Qatar and Saudi Arabia', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 33/2 (2011).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the influence of Saudi's clergy on politics see Nawaf E. Obaid, 'The Power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Leaders', *Middle East Quarterly* 1/3 (1999).

<sup>13</sup> Baskan and Wright, 'Seeds of Change', p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Alexis G. Grynkeiwich, 'Welfare as Warfare: How Violent Non-State Groups Use Social Services to Attack the State', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31/4 (2008).

<sup>15</sup> Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 156–7.

The Brotherhood, therefore, though having little discernible direct effect on policy in Qatar, was an important part of the background makeup of the state. The two entities came to develop a mutually beneficial relationship so long as the Brotherhood in Qatar was, inevitably, outward-facing. It is no surprise that the Brotherhood soon began to use Qatar as 'a launching pad for its expansion into the Emirates and especially Dubai' from the early 1960s.<sup>16</sup> The Brotherhood search for an outward focus found real traction with the influential al Jazeera platform afforded to Qaradawi from 1996 onwards, and is typified in the official closure of the Brotherhood branch in Qatar in 1999.<sup>17</sup>

### Utility of Brotherhood Links for Qatar

Both in the 1950s and 1960s and subsequently, there have clearly been those in the Qatari elite who have been motivated to a degree by a religiously inspired agenda. This in and of itself is a motivating factor explaining the push for the influx of Islamic scholars to Qatar, alongside the prosaic need to staff emerging bureaucracies with educated functionaries. The same impulses explain Saudi Arabia's reliance on Brotherhood teachers and professionals from the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Equally, for some in Qatar there may have been wider motivating factors, some of which prevail to this day.

Qatar's status as a Wahhabi country was firmly established by the modern-day founder of the state, Sheikh Jassim.<sup>19</sup> As such this was an inviolable plinth of the state's makeup. Yet it was not one that could be actively used to augment legitimacy or to promote Qatar as a state, because Wahhabism is indelibly linked to Saudi Arabia. To augment the status of Wahhabism in Qatar, to instil it explicitly through education systems in schools or to give its religious scholars an official place in government, would have been to instil intractably the necessary deference of Qatar to Saudi Arabia as the custodian of the two holy places and the al Wahhab legacy.

Instead, supporting the Brotherhood allowed a different group to develop Qatar's systems. This avoided a reliance on Saudi scholars or jurists to design and staff Qatar's systems in a Wahhabi image inevitably tilting towards Riyadh. Also, Qatar's leadership was in a stronger position and could set and enforce guidelines as to the group's limitations to a greater degree.

Otherwise, this hosting of Brotherhood scholars allowed Qatar to augment its regional status, with Brotherhood ideology being more widespread than Wahhabi thought. This allowed Qatar to fashion for itself a place as a key spoke in the Brotherhood wheel. Brotherhood members that Qatar attracted over the decades with its 'open door' policy were to prove essential in the Arab Spring. Such connections were particularly important given the personalised nature of politics in Qatar. Equally, in lieu of a mature Foreign Ministry able to track and develop new networks around the region, such contacts are doubly important.

<sup>16</sup> Tarek al Mubarak and Amr al Turabi, 'Al Masar al Mukhtalifah Fee al Khaleej' ['Different Paths in the Gulf'], *As Sharq Al-Awsat*, 11 November 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Haykel, 'Qatar and Islamism'. Sultan al Qassemi, 'Qatar's Brotherhood Ties Alienate Fellow Gulf States', *Al Monitor*, 23 January 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Ondrej Beranek, 'Divided We Survive: A Landscape of Fragmentation in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Brief* 33, Brandeis University (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar* (London and New York: Croom Helm. 1979), p. 54.

## The Qatari Brotherhood Exception

Outside Qatar, the default Gulf relationship with the Brotherhood is increasingly antagonistic in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, despite similarly important roles played by Brotherhood members in, for example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Relative size and wealth are one explanatory factor. Qatar's indigenous population is less than 300,000, and consequently its significant hydrocarbons resources make it one of the richest countries on earth in terms of gross domestic product per capita. In contrast, though Saudi too has prodigious hydrocarbons resources, it has tens of millions of Saudis to placate. As such, real poverty is found in Saudi Arabia, which endows the Kingdom with a dynamic of potentially disgruntled segments of its population that is simply not present in Qatar. The UAE is less like Saudi and more like Qatar, but unlike its smaller neighbour, it faces disparities in wealth between its federal states. Though there is scant evidence that this factor has been problematic thus far, the concern of potent, popular ideologies as espoused by the Brotherhood fomenting issues along such divisions of wealth is real and at the same time simply not found in Qatar. These theoretical but concerning security issues, entrenched and acted upon by the UAE's de facto leader Muhammad bin Zaid, who steadfastly distrusts the Brotherhood,<sup>20 21</sup> have prompted the UAE's sharp crackdown on Brotherhood activities within the state and its hardening stance against Qatar's support for the group.

For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Brotherhood is – today – anathema. It has not been forgiven for supporting Saddam Hussein in 1990, is blamed for radicalising Saudi youth, and is something of a threat as a large, well-organised, religiously driven group offering a concerningly viable Islamic model of governance in the Arab world, clearly clashing with Saudi's own version. Bahrain, as a barely concealed vassal state of Saudi Arabia, has had to fall into line and follow Riyadh's direction on this issue, though it has its own issues with Qatar too.

## Wider Concerns

Aside from difficulties with Qatar's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, its fellow GCC states have a raft of other problems with the small state. For a quarter of a century, Saudi Arabia has been trying to change Qatar's politics. From the Saudi perspective, Qatar used to be a well-behaved, quiet little Gulf state that obeyed the natural order of things and did as it was told. But since 1988, when Qatar opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and China without waiting for Saudi to do so first, Qatar has ploughed an increasingly independent furrow. Withdrawing the Saudi ambassador from Doha from 2002 to 2008 was one concerted attempt to pressure Qatar into changing its ways. This broadly failed, though for the return of the Saudi ambassador in late 2008, Riyadh did manage to force a change in al Jazeera's editorial policy towards the Kingdom, whereby it ignored Saudi politics to a greater degree.<sup>22</sup> There is a sense, therefore, that this ambassadorial kerfuffle was, in effect, Saudi Arabia trying to do to Qatar's new, young emir what it could not do to the father emir, Hamad bin Khalifah al Thani (r. 1995–2013).

<sup>20</sup> 'UAE Minimizing Influence of Islamic Extremists', WikiLeaks, 10 November 2004.

<sup>21</sup> 'Strong Words in Private from Mbz at Idex', WikiLeaks, 25 February 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Tal Samuel-Azran, 'Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy', *American Behavioural Scientist* 57/9 (2013).

Otherwise, there were tactical policies that deeply antagonised Qatar's neighbours. Doha stood accused of naturalising other states' citizens and particularly Sunni Muslims from Bahrain, exacerbating the sectarian dynamic.<sup>23</sup> In terms of wider foreign policies, in the increasing chaos of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular sought to impose order. Their version of how this could be best achieved was to back the likes of President Sisi in Egypt. As *The Times* of London's diplomatic editor put it, 'The Arab Spring, it seems, has been pronounced dead and we are giving it a military funeral on the banks of the Nile'.<sup>24</sup> With Sisi's stability in Egypt becoming inexorably more important as Saudi and the UAE poured more money into the Egyptian economy's black hole, Qatar's anti-Sisi stance assumed greater importance. Al Jazeera's constant sniping at the 'coup', undermining Sisi's rule, was one tangible and pointed bone of contention.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Qatar was seen as fomenting and exacerbating problems at a time when the region was increasingly beset on all sides. To the north, Iraq was imploding and the rise of *da'esh* (ISIS, or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) was ominous. Qatar was blamed here for generically funding the 'wrong' moderates and, in some cases, alleged extremists.<sup>26</sup> To the east, Iran's potential rapprochement with America raised tensions in the region, with the GCC states long fearing that America would strike some kind of 'grand bargain' at the expense of their security.<sup>27</sup> To the south, Yemen's depressing implosion continues, and Qatar's historic support of the Houthis – as far as the likes of Saudi are concerned, they are little less than overt Iranian proxies – lumps Qatar with blame there too.<sup>28</sup> To the west, the Sinai region is increasingly lawless and infiltrated by terrorists; an issue for which Qatar received tangential blame for exacerbating Egypt's security situation more generally, undermining President Sisi.<sup>29</sup>

## A Rapprochement?

Facing regional isolation as it had never done before, Qatar responded cautiously to the demands. Indeed, there were not unreasonable fears afoot that the punitive measures might be escalated to the closing of Saudi airspace or even the closure of the land border, which would have had dramatic consequences for Qatar.<sup>30</sup> Whether realistic or not, given that the ambassadorial withdrawal was entirely unexpected, another such move was plausible.

<sup>23</sup> 'Bahrain Accuses Qatar of Luring Citizens to Switch Nationality', *Reuters*, 7 August 2014. Available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/08/07/bahrain-qatar-naturalisation-idINL6N0QD4Q320140807> (accessed 10 March 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Roger Boyes, 'Goodbye, Arab Spring: We Like Dictators Now', *The Times*, 3 December 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Dina Ezzat, 'What Does a GCC Rapprochement Mean for Cairo?', *Ahram Online*, 18 November 2014. Available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/115737/Egypt/Politics-/What-does-a-GCC-rapprochement-mean-for-Cairo.aspx> (accessed 10 March 2015).

<sup>26</sup> David Kirkpatrick, 'Qatar's Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far', *New York Times*, 7 September 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Simeon Kerr, 'Thaw in US–Iranian Relations Prompts Alarm in Gulf States', *Financial Times*, 11 November 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Farea al Muslimi, 'Yemen Latest Front Line in Saudi–Qatari Feud', *Al Monitor*, 23 April 2014. Available at <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/11/article55338880> (accessed 10 March 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Abu Najm, 'Egypt FM: Qatar Must Support Our National Security', *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 28 November 2014. Available at <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/11/article55338974> (accessed 10 March 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Simeon Kerr, 'Qatar Prepares for Sanctions If Brotherhood Dispute Continues', *Financial Times*, 14 March 2014.

Initially, Qatar sought to try to calm tensions rhetorically. Doubtless some private concessions were made too. But when this proved to be clearly not enough, Qatar made incremental concessions. The first tangible sign occurred in August 2014 when Qatar announced that it would stop naturalising other GCC citizens.<sup>31</sup> Then in September, several prominent individuals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood left Qatar. The list includes Mahmoud Hussein, the secretary general of the Muslim Brotherhood; Amr Darrag, a former Brotherhood cabinet minister in Mohammed Morsi's government in Egypt and an important member of the Brotherhood's political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP); Wagdi Ghoneim, an (in)famous Islamist preacher; Essam Telima, a former office manager of Yusuf al-Qaradawi; Hamza Zawbaa, a spokesman for the FJP; Gamal Abdel Sattar, a prominent al-Azhar professor and a leader of the National Alliance party; and Ashraf Badr Eddin, a senior Brotherhood leader who fled Egypt after the Sisi coup.<sup>32</sup>

The UAE and Bahraini announcement in early November that their handball teams would not go to the world championships in Qatar seemed to suggest that the states were still looking to pressure Qatar. But it transpired that the Saudi-led desire to reconcile with Qatar and to present a united front, typified in the GCC annual summit due to take place in Doha on 9 and 10 December, was strong, and on 17 November the ambassadors returned.

Yet there is little evidence that Qatar has structurally changed its policies as demanded. While this would take some time, al Jazeera Arabic is still broadly hostile to the Sisi regime. Qatar still hosts Egyptian exiles: witness the full-page interview in a Qatari newspaper with the wanted Egyptian salafi Asim AbdulMajid the day before the return of the ambassadors was announced, while the likes of Tareq al-Zumr, the leader of the political faction of the terrorist group *Gama'a al Islamiyya*, is still resident in Doha and contributes sporadically to al Jazeera.<sup>33</sup>

The GCC summit under Qatari auspices went ahead in December 2014, though it lasted only one day of the expected two. Also, while the absence of Oman's Sultan Qaboos and Saudi's King Abdullah was expected due to ill health, that the UAE's de facto ruler Mohammed bin Zayed did not attend can only be interpreted as a modest, but public rebuke. The fact that practically no meaningful measures or policies came out of the summit is not unusual. Nevertheless, this summit was useful in and of itself as a sign – albeit not the most convincing sign – that the GCC issues are over.

<sup>31</sup> 'Qatar Pledges to End Naturalisation of GCC Citizens: Report', *Gulf News*, 16 August 2014. Available at <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-pledges-to-end-naturalisation-of-gcc-citizens-report-1.1372615> (accessed 10 March 2015).

<sup>32</sup> See Louise Loveluck, 'Qatar Asks Muslim Brotherhood Members to Leave Country', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 September 2014. Patrick Kingsley, 'Qatar Asks Senior Muslim Brotherhood Leaders to Leave Country', *Guardian*, 13 September 2013. Maged Amany, 'Shown the Red Card', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 18 September 2014. Available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/7284/17/Shown-the-red-card.aspx> (accessed 10 March 2015). 'The Brotherhood Diaspora', *MadaMasr*, 30 September 2014. Available at <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/brotherhood-diaspora> (accessed 10 March 2015).

<sup>33</sup> AbdulMajid Qatub, 'Asim Abdulmajid: 28 Nowfember Sayushaahid Tahwilaan Nuwaayan Fee Huwiya Al Thawra Al Misriyah' ['Asim Abdulmajid: 28 November Will See a Qualitative Shift in the Identity of the Egyptian Revolution'], *Al Sharq*, 16 November 2014.



At this time of fragile GCC unity, the group, or rather Saudi Arabia, is eager to forge the six states into a more defence-oriented alliance. Ideas as to a unified GCC military command have been several years in the making and some announcements were made in Doha.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, a GCC-wide police force, GCC-Pol, is to be based in Abu Dhabi to focus on regional cooperation in the face of terrorist threats, a joint naval force is to be based in Bahrain, and a theoretical 100,000-strong GCC military force is to be based in Riyadh.<sup>35</sup>

But this is not the first time that the GCC has announced grandiose plans, which have subsequently fallen flat. Panicking because of the rise of Iranian power in the Gulf, the GCC itself was formed in 1981, but its record of achievement is less than spectacular. Panicking after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the GCC announced in March 1991 the 'Damascus declaration' to forge military alliances with Syria and Egypt, but when the crisis subsided, the idea was dropped. Panicking after the Arab Spring started, the GCC announced – out of the blue and with astonishingly little thought or design – that Morocco and Jordan would join the GCC, but when the crisis did not appear as imminently dangerous (and the absurdity of it was realised: Muscat is closer to Shanghai than to Rabat), the idea was dropped. And again, panicking as the GCC sees crisis at all points of the compass, it has once more lurched towards greater integration. Time will tell if this iteration of integration is more successful, but history suggests that it will struggle.

## Conclusion

Qatar's support of the Brotherhood is not as much of a preference as it may seem. It originated as the result of a structural necessity to staff positions without inculcating any systems that would automatically defer to Saudi Arabia. Equally, it also continues to make Qatar an important spoke of the wider Brotherhood wheel, expanding its importance regionally. These networks played the central role in Qatar seeking to augment its influence during the Arab Spring, in lieu of its young Foreign Ministry being able to develop contacts and broaden relations meaningfully. Though many of these gambles subsequently misfired, this strategy could be recycled at some stage in the future; the Brotherhood associates that left Qatar did so willingly and understanding the pressure that Qatar was under. These bridges have not been burned. A fundamental shift away from using these links is, therefore, more than merely rhetorically redirecting policy, but is an institutional challenge for Qatar.

Only with the removal of the ambassadors did Qatar first realise just how much antagonism it was creating. For Qatar, a country with a small native population where there has typically existed a strong sociopolitical bargain between ruler and ruled, the Brotherhood has never posed any kind of threat. The same cannot be said in the UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular, where different domestic and foreign policy considerations contrive to make the Brotherhood anathema and Qatar's support of the group deeply concerning.

<sup>34</sup> Simeon Kerr, 'Gulf States Launch Joint Command to Counter Isis and Iran', *Financial Times*, 30 November 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Justin Vela, 'GCC to Set up Regional Police Force Based in Abu Dhabi', *National*, 10 December 2014. John Duke Anthony, 'Gulf Cooperation Council Establishes Unprecedented Joint Military Command', *NUSCAR*, 11 December 2014.

Indeed, nowhere can the 'same but different' nature of the Gulf states be seen better than in this example. The Arab Spring is a phenomenon that has driven a deep wedge between notionally fraternal states. Qatar's broad continuity in its approach contrasts with the about-turn in the thrust of those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular, going from states that at one stage encouraged the influx of Brothers to states that deem the entire group illegal. The sharpness of the reaction against Qatar in withdrawing the ambassadors, and the legal steps taken against the Brotherhood, make it difficult for Saudi Arabia or the UAE to resume their previous policies. Nor can Qatar's new leader, the 34-year-old emir who enjoyed his first anniversary in the post in July 2014, capitulate and recant his state's fundamental positioning. Perhaps Emir Tamim can calm down some of the aspects of Qatar's policies that most antagonise regional states, giving the leadership room to reconcile and remind themselves that there is more that unites them than divides them. But, given the vehement, Manichaean tone of the recent spat, there appears to be a new and uncomfortable configuration in the Gulf. Without major and unlikely concessions on one side, this issue looks set to challenge regional relations for the foreseeable future, whatever notional pan-GCC military architecture disguises the divisions.

## Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy: Loss without Gain?

### Madawi Al-Rasheed

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Saudi Arabia was most comfortable with the old Arab order in which it had maintained long-term relations with stable regional allies and international partners. With the exception of its historical rivalry with Iran that dates to 1979, it had in the Arab region several close allies and friends it could rely on in times of crisis. The challenge to this old order originated in the Arab uprisings that swept the region in 2011. The uprisings bewildered Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and eventually led to the creation of more enemies than friends. The Saudi regime was compelled to resist the uprisings and develop foreign policies to guarantee the permanence of the monarchy as a model of government in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries,<sup>1</sup> and loyal military republicanism elsewhere. These two objectives dictated the way Saudi Arabia responded to the Arab uprisings.

If 'managing' the outcome of the Arab uprisings had motivated the Saudi regime during the turbulent years since 2011, its foreign policy would not have suffered heavy losses. However, the Saudi regime was gripped by a justifiable fear of the domino effect of the Arab uprisings and pre-emptively implemented bewildered and chaotic policies. Managing the outcome was simply not an option for a regime that had so far resisted any attempt to open its own political system to more participation and accountability. Rather, the uprisings prompted Saudi Arabia to undermine these revolts swiftly, using its hard and soft power in an attempt to return to the status quo ante. From direct subsidies to preserve other monarchies (Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain and Oman) to propaganda against the uprisings as either chaos and dissent (Egypt) or sectarian takeover of the world of Sunni Islam (Bahrain and the Eastern Province), the regime put its full weight behind strategies that preserve monarchical rule and bring back a loyal military to replace elected presidents.

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Yom and Gregory Gause III, 'Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On', *Journal of Democracy* 23/4 (2012), pp. 74-88.

## The Domestic Context

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is a reflection of its domestic and regional contexts. Domestically, as an absolute monarchy, Saudi Arabia remains a conservative regime that resists political change and is willing to undermine any democratic experiment in the region by all means. This has become more urgent than it used to be several decades ago as Saudi society itself has begun to engage with ideas that had for long been depicted as alien to the Saudi salafi context. Since 2001, Saudi activists and intellectuals have sent more than 12 petitions asking the leadership to respond to political reform, introduce an elected national assembly, prepare a constitution, and limit the excessive repressive practices of the Ministry of Interior and its security agencies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when the Arab uprisings broke out, Saudi Arabia was beginning to emerge from a decade of terrorism that shattered the myth of the country as a stable island in a turbulent Arab sea.<sup>3</sup> The terrorism crisis between 2003 and 2008 exposed the prevalence of home-grown jihadi ideology and activism that had been denied in the past. Saudi Arabia admitted that it had a terrorism problem only several years after 9/11, and only under pressure from the USA and the wave of bombing that swept Saudi cities did it begin to tighten its security and intelligence services to combat the menace. Its success in expelling terrorism to neighbouring countries was declared a victory over al-Qaeda and its affiliates. But many peaceful activists were not intimidated by terrorism as a pretext to delay demanding political reform. In fact many Saudi activists saw the problem of terrorism as a product of an alliance between an authoritarian government and an equally authoritarian religious tradition. They envisaged the solution in terms of political change that would move the political system to a constitutional monarchy. Many Saudi activists were reinvigorated by the Arab uprisings and circulated two new petitions reiterating their earlier demands for national elections, separation of powers, freedom of expression, an independent judiciary and respect for human rights.<sup>4</sup> The slogans of the Arab revolt (freedom, dignity and justice) did touch a raw nerve in Saudi Arabia especially among intellectuals, women, human right activists and Islamists.

Despite Islamism being the most prolific and organised religio-political trend in the country, Islamists remained acquiescent and refrained from supporting calls for mass demonstrations along the lines of those experienced elsewhere in the region.<sup>5</sup> Yet there was a group of Islamist reformers working within the context of unlicensed civil and political rights associations who openly supported demonstrations as peaceful means to put pressure on the regime to reform itself. Through a reinterpretation of religious texts, they offered new understanding that justified the Arab uprisings and praised the courage of the youth who started them. With the official Saudi religious establishment condemning the revolts in

<sup>2</sup> Calls for reform are discussed in the following: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 230–7. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 261–70. Joseph Kechichian, *Legal and Political Reform in Saudi Arabia* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 242–70.

<sup>3</sup> On terrorism in Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2008, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Internal Dilemmas and Regional Responses to the Arab Uprisings', in Fawaz Gerges (ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 353–79.

<sup>5</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'No Saudi Spring: Anatomy of a Failed Revolution', *Boston Review*, March/April (2012), pp. 33–9. Stéphane Lacroix, 'Is Saudi Arabia Immune?', *Journal of Democracy* 4 (2011), pp. 48–59.

North Africa, important religious scholars associated with the Saudi Islamic Awakening immediately rushed to celebrate the success of the Egyptian and Tunisian masses in toppling their regimes. For example, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a veteran Islamist, wrote a book on the legitimacy of revolutionary action from an Islamic and salafi point of view.<sup>6</sup> The Saudi regime closely watched the limited mobilisation among its majority Sunni population and increased repression that led to hundreds of activists being put in prison during the first three months of the Arab uprisings.<sup>7</sup>

However, the regime's heightened sense of insecurity and fear prevented it from assessing the real potential for revolution in Saudi Arabia itself. With the exception of the anticipated domino effect reaching the Shi'a Eastern Province, other regions of Saudi Arabia remained relatively quiet until the present day. In fact the exceptional Shi'a uprising in Qatif and Awamiyya from February 2011 proved to be beneficial to the regime rather than a profound challenge.<sup>8</sup> The Shi'a uprising pushed the majority Sunni population to support the regime as it claimed that it was fighting against agents of external powers, determined to undermine Saudi security. The Qatif uprising remained a contained threat constantly reminding Saudis of an allegedly imminent external danger, thus contributing to delaying any confrontation with the regime over more political rights and reform. As such, the Shi'a uprising was left to brew as a turbulent enclave under government control. Even with more than 20 young Shi'a activists shot by the security forces and hundreds put in prison, there was little chance for inter-sectarian solidarities to develop across Saudi Arabia given the Arab region's descent into sectarian conflict and division, not to mention official salafi denunciation of the Shi'a as a heretical fifth column. More importantly, the Saudi regime exaggerated the Shi'a threat which had been articulated by other Arab leaders such as King Abdullah of Jordan and deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak since 2009. When the Bahraini uprising broke out in February 2011, it was depicted in the Saudi official media as a sectarian rebellion, supported by Iran and destined to spill over to Saudi Arabia, rather than a pro-democracy movement inspired by its own local grievances against the Bahraini regime and by the revolutionary fever that swept the Arab world.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the emerging Sunni political activism and the open confrontations in the Shi'a region, Saudi society faced serious economic problems due to high unemployment and poverty levels among its youth bulge, deteriorating welfare services and shortage of housing. Grievances were mounting, increasing the pressure on the government to deal with corruption at the local and national levels that led to several flooding incidents and deaths in major Saudi cities. This prompted King Abdullah to announce a package of subsidies, new employment opportunities and other welfare services worth \$130 billion in February and March 2011 to contain dissent.<sup>10</sup> Many Saudi activists expected the king to promise political reform under the pressure of the Arab uprisings to combat any mobilisation, but reformers were disappointed when only economic largesse was offered.

<sup>6</sup> Salman al-Awdah, *Asi'lat al-Thawra* ['Questions on Revolution'] (Beirut: Markz Inma' lil-Buhuth, 2012). Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'In the Shadow of Revolutions', *Middle East in London Magazine*, April/May (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia Annual Report*, 2011. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/region/saudi-arabia/report-2011> (accessed 2 January 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Toby Matthiesen, 'A "Saudi Spring?": The Shia Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012', *Middle East Journal* 66/4 (2012), pp. 628–59.

<sup>9</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Sectarianism as Counterrevolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11/3 (2011), pp. 513–26.

<sup>10</sup> *BBC News*, 'Saudi King Warns against Unrest while Boosting Benefits', 18 March 2011. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12781068> (accessed 3 April 2011).



Yet the regime was perhaps unaware of the fact that grievances alone do not create revolutions, especially in fragmented societies where national politics and civil society are weak and where sectarian, regional, tribal and gender divides are paramount. The insecurities of a regime headed by an ailing king, the uncertainty surrounding succession to the throne, and the increasing rivalry over leadership among the second-generation princes meant that the Saudi regime could not simply ignore the turbulence of the Arab region and the prospect, albeit remote, of this turbulence reaching the heartland of Arabia at its weakest domestic moment. It had to pacify the domestic front with subsidies and the promise of more welfare. So far the policy has succeeded in delaying the problems erupting into a fully fledged revolt, which was a remote possibility in a country like Saudi Arabia anyway.

## Regional and International Losses

In addition to the regime's domestic reasons for suppressing the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia was increasingly feeling besieged by hostile neighbours. Even before the uprisings, its relations with Iraq had deteriorated and reached the hostility level. Saudi Arabia never accepted the rehabilitation of post-Saddam Iraq into Arab forums and continued to press for its marginalisation. Its relations with Iraqi President Nuri al-Maliki remained tense, and reached breaking point after Saudi Arabia was constantly accused of sponsoring the *takfiri* terrorism that lasted for several years after the US occupation in 2003. Saudi prisoners in Iraqi jails continue to be proof of the Saudi connection with Sunni groups in Iraq that waged jihad against al-Maliki's government.<sup>11</sup> Saudi efforts to mediate between the warring Sunni and Shi'a factions in Mecca in 2008–9 during its civil war did not yield tangible outcomes, and the regime continues until the present day to be accused of backing rebels in the Sunni areas of Iraq.

Equally, Saudi relations with the Syrian regime had been tense even before the Arab Spring and deteriorated further when the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011. Saudi Arabia demanded the removal of Bashar al-Assad in international forums and dedicated billions to arming the rebels. Its policy in Syria proved to be ad hoc, aiming above all to disrupt Iran's sphere of influence, which stretched from Baghdad to Beirut bypassing Damascus, and to return Syria to Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence, rather than supporting the transition of Syria to democracy. Like other international actors, Saudi Arabia underestimated the resilience of the Syrian regime, which became increasingly dependent on Iran, Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The Saudi strategy of supporting the Syrian rebels is linked to its waning influence in Lebanon, where its traditional allies, for example Saad al-Hariri, began to lose to other factions on the complex Lebanese political map. Saudi Arabia saw its influence in Lebanon gradually being eroded. With Saudi relevance to the Israeli–Palestinian crisis slowly fading, the Levant seems to have slipped away from Saudi Arabia as a region where it can exercise serious influence.

The USA and other international players increasingly questioned Saudi intervention in Syria as it became clear that its efforts have so far strengthened a radical group of rebels at the expense of more moderate Islamists and secularists. Under mounting external pressure to

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<sup>11</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of the US Invasion of Iraq', in Rick Fawn and Raymond Hinnebusch (eds), *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006), pp. 153–61.

control the arrival of radical jihadis in Syria, Saudi Arabia enforced a terrorism law that promises to punish returnees with at least 20 years in prison.<sup>12</sup> However, the new law does not try to catch them before they go, thus indicating reluctance to keep jihadis at home. Their exit and eventual death in Syria is probably the most desired outcome from the Saudi perspective. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia went beyond indirect interference in its domestic affairs, through manipulation of tribal groups and subsidies to the Yemeni regime, to direct military intervention against the Houthis, accused of being sponsored by its regional rival, Iran. With the risk of losing Yemen to Iran through the Houthis, Saudi Arabia wanted to contain the Yemeni uprising and keep its patronage of the Yemeni regime intact.

Close to home, relations with Qatar continued to be tense despite the semblance of calm and reconciliation from 2007.<sup>13</sup> Qatar's historical support for a wide range of Islamist groups in North Africa, above all the Muslim Brotherhood, remained a source of contention between the two countries. Saudi Arabia was worried about Qatar becoming a platform for Saudi Islamists. By the time the Arab uprisings broke out, several Saudi Islamists had already moved to Qatar, such as Muhammad al-Ahmari, who was there granted Qatari nationality and ran Islamist research centres. Qatar regularly invites Saudi preachers such as famous Islamist sheikhs Salman al-Awdah and Muhammad al-Oraifi to deliver lectures and sermons. Most of them are close to Muslim Brotherhood Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, with his network of new media and research forums. Since 2013, Saudi Arabia has banned several sheikhs from going to Qatar after it became a magnet for those Islamists who like to be known as moderate in comparison with the salafis, although the lines are often blurred between the two camps, especially in the Gulf context.

Saudi Arabia interpreted the success of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia as a success of their backer, Qatar, and its hidden agenda to replace Saudi Arabia as the major arbiter of Arab regional politics. With a small population and a disbanded Muslim Brotherhood branch, Qatar does not seem to fear the rise of Islamists to power after the Arab uprisings. But the situation is different in Saudi Arabia, where not only terrorism but also a peaceful Islamist movement has existed since the 1970s. While not all Saudi Islamists oppose their government – some constitute one of the most loyal groups – there are historical precedents when Islamists challenged regime domestic policies and international alliances. For example, Islamists posed a real threat when they objected to the invitation of foreign troops to liberate Kuwait in 1990–1. Since then, repression has ensured that Islamists remained under control with only a fringe movement drifting towards violence and joining the many branches of al-Qaeda. Therefore, the Saudi regime feared that Islamists would be empowered after the Arab uprisings across the region including in Saudi Arabia itself. Consequently, it made sure that they were ousted from power in the most important country for Islamist mobilisation, namely Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be in control for at least four years. The prospect of this worried Saudi Arabia, which rushed to support the coup that led to removing the Brotherhood from power and restoring a kind of military republicanism.

<sup>12</sup> Aya Batrawi, 'Saudi Arabia's New Anti-Terrorism Law to Criminalise Any Form of Dissent – Including Demanding Political Reform and Exposing Corruption', *Independent*, 3 February 2014. Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabias-new-antiterrorism-law-to-criminalise-any-form-of-dissent-including-demanding-political-reform-and-exposing-corruption-9105249.html> (accessed 3 February 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Al-Rasheed, *History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 237–41.

King Abdullah was the first to congratulate the interim Egyptian government and promise lavish subsidies worth billions of dollars.<sup>14</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood remaining in power would have allowed Saudi Islamists to gain a friendly space in the heart of the Arab region where their activities and mobilisation would have been welcome and tolerated.

It is ironic that a regime that claims to rule according to sharia and Islam in general fears most the rise of Islamists to power, especially as a result of the democratic process. This fear of course does not apply to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, where Saudi Arabia had diplomatic relations, but does apply to those moderate Islamists who combine Islam and democracy in a functional, rhetorical manner. The Taliban represented a worse model of Islamic government than that in Saudi Arabia; hence they were not a serious challenge. The Muslim Brotherhood is a different matter as its recruitment base in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in general remains the educated middle classes, who combine a certain kind of piety with immersion in modernity and capitalist consumption. This class is destined to widen as a result of the expansion of mass education. Saudi Arabia's overt support for the Egyptian coup inevitably led to abandoning the veneer of accommodation with Sunni Islamist groups and turned the Muslim Brotherhood into real enemies after decades of tolerance and precarious coexistence with the Saudi regime. Saudi Arabia continues to support the Brotherhood rivals, for example the Salafi parties that sprang up in Egypt after the 2011 uprising.

Previously the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood played an important role in helping Saudi Arabia demonstrate its Islamic credentials through their work in Saudi-sponsored pan-Islamic organisations,<sup>15</sup> but after the 2013 Egyptian coup, the regime lost them as allies, albeit reluctant and suspicious ones. It is fair to say that the Muslim Brotherhood remains the only ideological rival to Saudi Arabia, as both claim to seek Islamic governance; hence the clash may continue in the future.

In the context of the GCC meetings, the semblance of solidarity was maintained, but tense relations with Qatar and other GCC countries over security and economic matters demonstrated that Saudi hegemony over this regional forum was also under stress and could no longer be taken for granted. With the exception of Bahrain, Saudi authority over the rest of the council members was at best tolerated and at worst openly challenged. GCC members resisted several Saudi initiatives: the Saudi king's wish to move the Council speedily from cooperation to union, the GCC common currency with a central bank in Riyadh, the incorporation of Morocco and Jordan as special partners in the GCC and the common Internal Security Pact. On these proposals, Saudi Arabia was unable to force a consensus among its closest GCC partners.<sup>16</sup> The United Arab Emirates (UAE) resisted financial homogenisation; Oman utterly rejected the union and has openly threatened to withdraw from the GCC if it becomes reality; Kuwait did not welcome either inviting Jordan to be a special GCC member or the new Internal Security Pact; and Qatar resented Saudi efforts to undermine its Islamist clients in North Africa and promote the salafis as a counter-current.

<sup>14</sup> *Reuters*, 'Saudi Arabia to Give Egypt up to \$4 Billion More Aid', 30 January 2014. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/30/us-egypt-saudi-idUSBREA0T0C920140130> (accessed 30 January 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 38–51.

<sup>16</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi-Qatar Tensions Divide GCC', *Al-Monitor*, 6 March 2014. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/saudi-qatar-gcc-tensions-islamist.html> (accessed 6 March 2014).

The fragmentation of the GCC and the rift between its members is one of the unexpected casualties of the Arab uprisings. On 5 March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE announced in a joint statement that they had withdrawn their ambassadors from Qatar, thus confirming the country as the *enfant terrible* of the Gulf monarchies.<sup>17</sup> Vague reasons were given to justify this bold and unprecedented move, attributed to ensuring 'stability and security', while sensational details began to emerge in the Saudi-sponsored press about the alleged hidden intrigues of Qatar against its neighbours. These three GCC states claim to have tried to convince Qatar to remain within the fold of the GCC in its overall policies towards the Arab region, and mainly to withdraw its support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar was asked to stop being a launch pad for dissidents and activists not only in the wider Arab region but also in the Gulf itself. In February 2014, one Qatari doctor was put on trial and sentenced to seven years in prison for his support for the Muslim Brotherhood and his work to spread its ideology in the UAE, where more than 90 activists had already been rounded up and put in prison.<sup>18</sup> Relations between Qatar and the UAE reached breaking point. Saudi Arabia managed to enlist Bahrain and the UAE to back this symbolic break in relations with Qatar, but it must remain the prime suspect behind ostracising an old and troublesome neighbour.

The major blow to Saudi hegemony over the GCC was, however, Gulf differences over the so-called Iranian threat. Saudi Arabia will probably never forgive Sultan Qabus of Oman for playing a covert role in facilitating dialogue between Iran and the USA, which led to a serious rapprochement and continuous dialogue over Iran's nuclear programme. If this rapprochement leads to lifting the sanctions imposed on Iran and its rehabilitation in the international community, Saudi Arabia will no doubt interpret this as a blow to its exclusive position in the region as the main US ally. It will also undermine Saudi Arabia's role as a swing oil producer, with new supplies coming from both Iran and Iraq, which recently joined efforts to increase their production and rival that of Saudi Arabia by 2020.

Whilst Saudi Arabia may contain the recent rift with the smaller GCC countries, mend relations with Islamists, ignore Iraqi hostility and emerge unscathed out of the Syrian mayhem, its biggest challenges seems to emanate from its troubled relation with the USA over three issues: the US failure to rescue its allies during the Arab uprisings, the US refusal to deploy force to topple Bashar al-Assad, and the US rapprochement with Iran. US policies are outcomes of the turbulence of the Arab uprisings and its unwillingness to be seen as a supporter of the ancient regimes at what appeared to be an historical moment. Unlike Saudi Arabia, the USA reluctantly considered the Arab uprisings as an opportunity, albeit a challenging one. The old order was no longer functioning domestically although it ensured regional stability and was believed to have worked towards containing Islamist violence. But in reality most Arab regimes were responsible for creating the conditions where this violence thrived. Saudi Arabia was part of the old Arab world order and was bound to collide with the USA over its lukewarm enthusiasm for political change.

<sup>17</sup> *BBC News*, 'Gulf Ambassadors Pulled from Qatar over Interference', 5 March 2014. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26447914> (accessed 5 March 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Bill Law, 'UAE Jails Qatari Doctor for Supporting Banned Group', *BBC News*, 3 March 2014. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26421613> (accessed 3 March 2014).

The ongoing terrorism in Iraq and the beginning of the same scenario in Syria since 2011 must have worried the USA and its European allies. As long as this terrorism remains connected to Saudi ideological and religious teachings, the regime remains accused of not doing enough to eliminate the threat in its original homeland or stop its export to other countries. Saudi intervention in Syria, together with that of Qatar, are increasingly seen in many world capitals as a negative contribution rather than a positive step towards deposing Bashar al-Assad. The Arab uprisings must have speeded the US desire to reach out to Iran, its historical enemy of over 30 years, as the latter elected Hassan Rouhani as its new president. Saudi Arabia is bound to feel abandoned by its closest ally; hence President Obama's visit in March 2014 that was meant to assure Saudi Arabia of continuous US support. But Saudi Arabia has no alternative to the USA, which guarantees its security, despite all the hostile rhetoric since the rapprochement with Iran in 2013 and its refusal to use direct military action against the Syrian regime.

In order to pursue its main two foreign policy objectives, namely the preservation of monarchy as a model of government and the return of loyal military republicanism, Saudi Arabia drew on its financial resources. So far, the recipients have been Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. Each country received substantial subsidies and gifts. The promise of support was enough to send strong messages to the current recipients and future potential ones. This was a classic example of aid tied to specific foreign policy objectives, and Saudi Arabia was no different from other governments in pursuing this old strategy.

The second tool deployed was diplomacy at the regional Arab League level and at the United Nations, where Saudi Arabia pushed the international community to press for sanctions against the Syrian regime and even depose Assad by force. However, this has not so far resulted in the outcomes desired by Saudi Arabia. Britain, France and the USA refrained from direct military intervention in Syria. In fact, by August 2014, Assad seems to have survived the deadly civil war, the use of chemical weapons and the killing of more than 191,369 Syrians, according to the United Nations News Centre.<sup>19</sup> His demise does not look imminent although his authority over Syria seems to wax and wane.

The third tool available to Saudi Arabia was to increase pressure on the small GCC states to unite behind its foreign policy. Withdrawing ambassadors from Qatar remains a symbolic gesture marking Saudi anger with the *enfant terrible* of the Gulf monarchies. This is comparable with its rejection of the non-permanent member seat on the Security Council in 2013, which was meant to send clear signals to Washington that it was not happy with US policies on Syria and Iran. However, snubbing the international community and Qatar is yet to yield positive outcomes for Saudi Arabia in the long term. Both actions reflected a sense of desperation rather than strength in Riyadh. The more the Saudi regime wanted to appear hegemonic, the less its actions reflected thoughtful strategies that might have resulted in desirable outcomes.

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<sup>19</sup> United Nations News Centre, 'UN: More than 191,000 People Killed in Syria with "No End in Sight"'. Available at [http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48535#.VPms\\_ihB-sE](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48535#.VPms_ihB-sE) (accessed 6 March 2015).



## Conclusion

Saudi foreign policy during the Arab uprisings experienced four main losses. First, the loss of traditional regional allies prompted the Saudi search for alternatives through proposals to recruit new partners for the GCC and play the role of a counter-revolutionary force in places such as Egypt. Secondly, the loss of the Arab Islamist movement that resulted from overtly supporting the overthrow of President Muhammad Morsi in July 2013 ended the semblance of accommodation between two competing ideological models for State, society and governance, with serious potential implications for the Saudi domestic scene. Thirdly, the loss of GCC cohesion and solidarity, with Qatar and Oman appearing to be more defiant of Saudi Arabia's policies and initiatives, and with each member-state acting to assert its autonomy, undermined Saudi's regional hegemony. And finally, the loss of trust between the USA and Saudi Arabia, following the US rapprochement with Iran, was an unexpected outcome of a long process in which the USA was certainly searching for a real balance in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia, each struggling to expand its influence across the Arab world. The failure to depose Bashar al-Assad of Syria despite serious military and diplomatic efforts can only amplify Saudi losses and undermine its credibility at the domestic, regional and international levels. The losses of Saudi Arabia will automatically translate into gains for its regional rivals.

But has Saudi Arabia also achieved real gains? It has successfully contained three revolts in the Arabian Peninsula (the Eastern Province, Bahrain and Yemen) that would have had a more serious impact on its domestic front than those in North Africa. Yet the continuous clashes in the Eastern Province, the repression in Bahrain and the ongoing instability in Yemen indicate that containment is not necessarily an elimination of the danger in the long term. In North Africa, the persistent problem of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a reminder of the precarious stability that the military has achieved so far. As for Syria, there does not seem to be an imminent victory over the regime, with the rebels and their multiple regional sponsors engaged in internal fighting over the right horse to back.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since 2011 may defy any assessment in terms of success or failure. The regime remains bewildered, erratic and sometimes desperate to fulfil its ambition to become the main arbiter of Arab regional politics. More than at any other time, these grandiose Saudi designs seem unrealistic in the context of a changing Arab world where charismatic leaders, if ever they emerge, will find it difficult to gather support and followers. It seems that the Saudi regime has not yet understood the meaning of the Arab uprisings and their long-term impact on the region, although now the uprisings appear to have stumbled and even reversed. Such dramatic changes as those that swept the region over the last few years are bound to come in waves. We have seen only the first wave. But the cumulative impact, which will lead to further rounds of contestation, will no doubt continue to manifest itself. Saudi Arabia appears more desperate to resist this first wave and return to the status quo ante.

## Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis

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The Syria crisis may have begun as a domestic struggle, but it quickly became a key arena of competition for regional and international rivals, with Gulf actors heavily involved. The Syrian civil war, as the crisis became when initially unarmed opposition took up arms in the face of violent repression by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, is frequently viewed as a proxy war. Iran and Russia, with support from Hezbollah and Iraq, stand with Assad, while the West, Turkey and the Gulf states support the various rebel groups. The war is also now frequently characterised as a sectarian conflict. Assad's regime is dominated by members of his own Alawite sect, a distant branch of Shi'ism that made up 12 per cent of Syria's pre-war population, while the opposition are mostly from the underrepresented 65 per cent Sunni Arabs. The rise of sectarian language, especially from radical Sunni jihadists, and the perpetration of a number of sectarian massacres by both sides seem to confirm this characterisation. Sunni Gulf actors have added to, and even fuelled, this perception. The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have leant considerable support to the Sunni-led opposition, but this has repeatedly been justified in their media outlets and to domestic audiences in sectarian terms with the Alawites and Shi'a demonised.<sup>1</sup> This overlap of a regional proxy war with clear sectarian undertones has led many to interpret the Syrian civil war as a battle in a wider, primordial, civilisational clash between Shi'as and Sunnis.<sup>2</sup>

This paper seeks to challenge some of these assumptions by examining the Gulf states' policies towards the Syria crisis. It focuses on three interrelated questions that contribute to this volume's wider themes on the foreign policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. First, what has been the impact of Gulf policy on the Syria crisis and how has it shaped the conflict? Secondly, have the Gulf states shown the capacity and capability to affect the course of conflict in a way that fulfils their goals? Thirdly, what role has sectarianism played in Gulf policy?

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 137–56.

<sup>2</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Random House, 2013), p. 200. Stephan Rosiny, 'Power Sharing in Syria: Lessons from Lebanon's Taif Experience', *Middle East Policy* 20/3 (2013), pp. 41–55.

An immediate difficulty is the question of what we mean by 'the Gulf'. I refer to 'Gulf actors' in the title of this paper to acknowledge that a significant role has been played by non-state actors in the Syria crisis, most notably Gulf charities and individuals who have donated considerable funds to militias fighting Assad. The extent to which these actions are independent of state policy must be considered, given the often overlapping sources of finance for the rebels. A second distinction must be made when analysing the policies of state actors. Despite a degree of cooperation and a common goal in toppling Assad, the Gulf states have not acted in unity. In general there have been two approaches: that of Saudi Arabia, often followed by Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and that of Qatar. While other Gulf states have occasionally taken divergent paths, notably Kuwait, which has led international relief efforts on Syria's refugees, this paper will focus primarily on the policies of Doha and Riyadh.

The paper is divided into three sections and a conclusion. First it will offer context for Qatari and Saudi policy going into the Syria crisis, then consider their divergent aims once the conflict began, and how they have subsequently evolved. After this, the tools Gulf actors have deployed in Syria will be considered, from overt diplomatic action to covert and later overt military assistance to anti-Assad rebel militias, as well as soft, 'ideational' power. Thirdly, the extent to which actors' goals have been achieved will briefly be considered. In doing so, this paper aims to illustrate three central points about Gulf actors and the Syria crisis. The first is that the Gulf states revealed a limited capacity to achieve their goals, born from inexperience in proxy conflicts. Secondly, the lack of unity and, at times, outright rivalry between Saudi and Qatar has played a major role in their inability to topple the Assad regime. Finally, sectarianism is far less important than is perceived and is largely instrumentalised by actors to boost positions at home and abroad, while *raisons d'état* overwhelmingly dominate most calculations.

## Context and Aims

When Assad's troops fired on crowds of protestors in the southern Syrian town of Deraa in March 2011, initiating the Syrian uprising, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were in contrasting geopolitical positions. In the previous decade, Qatar had become close to Syria. The Emir, Hamid bin Khalifa al Thani, had played an active role alongside Turkey in breaking the US-led diplomatic boycott of Bashar al-Assad after his alleged involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. In 2008 Qatar crowned Syria's journey back from international exile by mediating the Doha Agreement, which effectively granted Syria's allies dominance over Lebanese politics. Despite a long-standing relationship with Assad's enemies, the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar took a pragmatic approach to Syria as the Bush boycott came to an end.

Saudi Arabia, in contrast, had helped lead the boycott, Hariri having been a close ally of King Abdullah. Indeed, the 2008 Doha Agreement was prompted by clashes between Saudi's anti-Syrian Sunni Lebanese allies, the Future Movement, and Syria-backed Hezbollah. This was the latest in a long line of strained ties that had worsened with the advent of the Syrian–Iranian alliance of 1979. Ideologically, the professed socialist Arab nationalism of Bashar and his father and predecessor, Hafez, clashes with the conservative Islamic monarchy of the Saudis, while the Alawite leadership in Damascus may seem a natural enemy to

the self-declared guardians of Sunnism in Riyadh. However, this relationship has been far from static, and it is false to characterise it in either ideological or religious terms. In bad times it is true that Saudi has tended to back co-religionist opposition to Assad, whether Sunni politicians in Lebanon or the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, many of whom were welcomed in Saudi after their defeat and expulsion in 1982. However, in 1973 and 1990 the regimes formed a military alliance in the face of a common enemy, Israel and Iraq respectively, and Saudi expelled members of the pro-Saddam Syrian Muslim Brotherhood during the latter conflict. Typically of this fluctuating relationship, by 2009–10 Riyadh was seeking détente. WikiLeaks cables show that in 2009 Abdullah was hoping to woo Assad away from Iran rather than confront him, an approach reflected in Bashar's visit to Jeddah in September, and Abdullah's return visit to Damascus the next month.<sup>3</sup> This reconciliation, however temporary, suggests Riyadh's thinking has been more shaped by an interests-driven desire to contain Iran than any identity-driven opposition to Assad's Alawite-led regime.

As an illustration of the pragmatic approach of both states towards Syria, when the uprising began, Qatar and Saudi reversed their traditional positions. Qatar, for example, was quick to abandon its friendship with Assad. The Qatari-owned al Jazeera news channel reported the Deraa protests from an anti-Assad angle from March 2011. As seen by the absence of coverage when protests broke out in neighbouring ally Bahrain, Qatar is able to influence al Jazeera's editorial policy when it is in its national interests, and utilised the channel to promote Doha as a supporter of the Arab Spring.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Saudi Arabia was quiet – not least because it had been behind the repression in Bahrain, also in March, which Assad appeared to be mimicking. Yet al Jazeera aside, both Doha and Riyadh were initially cautious. Indeed nearly five months passed before either state made any significant move against Assad. On 8 August King Abdullah became the first Arab leader to condemn the Syrian regime openly, calling for it to stop its 'killing machine' and withdrawing his ambassador from Damascus – a move copied by Qatar and other Gulf states.<sup>5</sup> Despite this initial caution, both states soon became the most active in pressing for Assad's fall, using a variety of tools discussed below. This transformation from relative caution to active involvement can be explained by considering the evolution of each state's goals.

Despite internal debate among Saudi policy makers, often reflecting domestic rivalries, Riyadh broadly looks at Syria with several fixed regional and domestic priorities. While many assume that regional rivalry with Iran is at the heart of all activity in Syria, the domestic agenda led Saudi's initial caution. In the context of the Arab Spring, March 2011 was a nervous time in Riyadh, with serious fears that unrest could spread to the Kingdom. Assad's repression of peaceful demonstrators was therefore not altogether unwelcome as Riyadh itself was battling similar calls in Bahrain and its own eastern provinces. By August, however, the immediate threat had passed. Abdullah had shored up his own domestic position with

<sup>3</sup> Jim Muir, 'High Hopes for Saudi-Syrian Summit', *BBC News*, 8 October 2009. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8296052.stm> (accessed 12 March 2014). Yazan Al-Saadi, 'Saudi-Syrian Relations: A Historic Divide', *Al-Akhbar* 4 December 2012. Available at <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3906> (accessed 12 March 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Mehran Kamrava, 'Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy', *Middle East Journal* 65/4 (2011), pp. 539–56.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Blomfield, 'Syria Unrest: Saudi Arabia Calls on "Killing Machine" to Stop', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 2011. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8687912/Syria-unrest-Saudi-Arabia-calls-on-killing-machine-to-stop.html> (accessed 12 March 2014).

\$37 billion of welfare measures, and lavished generous grants on other allied autocrats in Oman, Bahrain and Jordan to help stem the regional tide. Moreover, it soon became clear that the opposition to Assad was not easily containable, and his heavy-handed tactics were producing casualties far higher than elsewhere, with 2,000 killed by August. Arguably it was only at this point, once it became clear that Assad would not be able to deal swiftly with the crisis, that Saudi began to reconsider its approach, seeing the geostrategic advantage over Iran that the conflict might present.

Qatar's stance was less driven by domestic factors, beyond a general belief by Emir Hamid that boosting the emirate's profile abroad is well received at home.<sup>6</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen suggests that the changing regional environment caused by the Arab Spring prompted a deliberate shift in Qatari policy, adding military activism to pre-2011 efforts to boost its regional influence via the soft power of al Jazeera and mediation diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> Publicly opposing Assad fitted in with this shift. Bernard Haykel, among others, suggests that Hamid saw in the Arab Spring the chance to enhance Qatar's regional power by offering financial and, where necessary, military support to the Islamist groups that seemed to be coming to power.<sup>8</sup> Qatar's long ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, notably in Egypt and Syria, led a confident Hamid to invest most heavily in this group. Unlike Saudi, Qatar had few domestic fears from the Arab Spring, having a wealthy, small and mostly satisfied population. The Emir's caution in Syria in spring 2011 is thus partly explained by his distraction elsewhere, having launched what Ulrichsen describes as new military activism primarily in Libya. Qatar's shift to the Syrian arena in August 2011, in which it utilised its turn holding the rotating presidency of the Arab League, occurred just as the Libya conflict was reaching its climax in Tripoli. However, reports suggest that Qatar, along with Turkey, was privately imploring Assad until August 2011 to reform and accept some kind of accommodation with the Muslim Brotherhood, suggesting that even Hamid was not initially so confident that a similar activism was the best option in Syria.

The intensity of Qatar's engagement with the Syria crisis has varied according to domestic and regional factors, most notably the transition of power from Hamad to his son Tamim bin Hamad al Thani in June 2013, and the increase in rivalry with Saudi Arabia after the toppling of Qatar's ally, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, by a Riyadh-backed army coup in Cairo a few weeks later. Similarly, the tools deployed were gradually ratcheted up.<sup>9</sup> However, once Qatar was engaged, its goal stayed broadly the same: the removal of the Assad regime and its replacement by a friendly regime, dominated by its ally the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, Qatar had few concerns about Iran. Unlike Riyadh, Doha is bidding for increased influence, not regional ideological hegemony. Iran represented a relative rather

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Haykel, 'Qatar and Islamism', *NOREF Policy Brief* (February 2013). Available at [http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow\\_site/storage/original/application/ac81941df1be874ccbda35e747218abf.pdf](http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/ac81941df1be874ccbda35e747218abf.pdf) (accessed 15 March 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'From Mediation to Interventionism: Understanding Qatar's Arab Spring Policies', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 23 October 2013. Available at <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/From-Mediation-to-Interventionism-16170> (accessed 12 March 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Haykel, 'Qatar and Islamism'.

<sup>9</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, 'From Mediation to Interventionism'.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Katulis, 'Qatar, Saudi Arabia Diverge in Battle to Shape Changing Middle East', *World Politics Review*, 31 May 2013. Available at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12988/qatar-saudi-arabia-diverge-in-battle-to-shape-changing-middle-east> (accessed 12 March 2014).



than an absolute threat and Doha continued to have decent political and economic ties to Tehran, investing in the Iranian economy and hosting regular diplomatic meetings.<sup>11</sup>

Saudi's goals have been more complex. While it also seeks Assad's demise, this was initially, and remains, a means to weaken Iran's regional ambitions. Beyond this, new goals have emerged as the conflict and regional context evolved. With the increased sectarian tone of fighting, Abdullah recognised the importance of being seen to protect Syria's Sunnis. This had a domestic component, given that hardliners at home accused him of not doing enough to defend Iraq's Sunnis after the fall of Saddam.<sup>12</sup> Also on the domestic front, although it encourages a sectarian interpretation of the conflict, Riyadh fears its citizens will head off to fight in Syria, returning later to challenge the regime, as happened after the 1980s Afghanistan war. Consequently, the authorities banned certain activist clerics from preaching in 2012 and forbade young men to travel to Syria in 2014.<sup>13</sup> The best way to prevent domestic blowback is to ensure that the radical jihadist groups that have emerged in Syria, namely Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and, especially, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), do not win. Yet at the same time, Riyadh also fears the Muslim Brotherhood, seeing it as a popular regional rival. Having helped stop the Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, the last thing Riyadh wants is its victory in Syria. Thus Saudi aims to tread a fine line: ensuring the defeat of Iran's ally Assad in favour of a Sunni-dominated regime that is neither ISIS/JAN nor Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar's ally, while containing the extent of jihadi and sectarian fervour so that it does not prompt domestic blowback. With such a specific set of goals, it is not surprising that the tools deployed by Saudi have varied and evolved over time.

## Tools Deployed

Once engaged in the crisis, Saudi, Qatar and other Gulf actors have deployed a variety of tools. While the independent charities and individuals that have supported Syria's rebels are a particular case that will be discussed later, the state actors of Saudi and Qatar have followed similar paths. However, the levels of cooperation have been limited, and the rivalry between the two has often meant that efforts have run in parallel rather than convergence, greatly affecting the general chaos in Syria and the state actors' ability to achieve the one goal that they both agree upon: Assad's demise.

Qatar and Saudi have both ratcheted up their engagement in the Syria crisis, from diplomatic opposition to Assad all the way to militarily assisting the armed opposition. Their initial tool was diplomatic and economic pressure on Assad himself. Reflecting a time when the two rivals were at their most cooperative, Riyadh and Qatar echoed the West's approach to Damascus throughout 2011. After withdrawing ambassadors in August, Qatar took an

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<sup>11</sup> Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation*, p. 207. Elizabeth Dickinson, 'How Qatar Lost the Middle East', *Foreign Policy*, 5 March 2014. Available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/05/how\\_qatar\\_lost\\_the\\_middle\\_east](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/05/how_qatar_lost_the_middle_east) (accessed 17 March 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Frederic Wehrey, 'Saudi Arabia Reins in its Clerics on Syria', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14 June 2012. Available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/14/saudi-arabia-reins-in-its-clerics-on-syria/bu10> (accessed 17 March 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Simeon Kerr, 'Saudi Cracks Down on Youths Travelling to Syria', *Financial Times*, 4 February 2014. Available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c98efe4e-8d88-11e3-bbe7-00144feab7de.html#axzz2wJCikVoa> (accessed 1 March 2014). Wehrey, 'Saudi Arabia Reins in its Clerics on Syria'.

active role, as it had in Libya, to pressure Assad via the Arab League. In concert with Saudi, sanctions on Syria's economy were announced in November, along with an 'Arab League peace initiative' that entailed Assad standing down. When the regime refused, Riyadh and Qatar successfully moved to suspend Syria from the League. However, this did little to deter Assad. The sanctions were poorly implemented by Syria's allies and key trading partners, Lebanon and Iraq. Syria's economy nosedived, but this was more due to the war and the West's tougher sanctions on oil exports.

Both states were probably aware of their limited ability to place real pressure on Syria's economy, given Lebanon and Iraq's closer ties with Syria and Iran than with the Gulf, so the sanctions were primarily symbolic. Diplomacy with the regime would return fleetingly as an option for both states throughout the conflict, with both eventually endorsing the ultimately failed Geneva II peace process, attending the first talks between the regime and the opposition in early 2014. However, with the failure of the 2011–12 Arab peace plan, both Riyadh and Doha looked primarily to political and military pressure as the route to settlement, needing Western persuasion in 2014 to give the diplomatic tack another go.<sup>14</sup> Barely two months after sanctions were announced, in January 2012, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition in exile that had formed in Turkey in summer 2011, was officially given financial support from Saudi and Qatar. Given the prominent position in the SNC of Qatar's ally, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other exiles close to Saudi, it is likely that unofficial support had come before this.

The crisis descended into an armed civil war in August 2011 with the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who rejected the opposition's previously peaceful approach and the subsequent formation of militias, at first loosely under the FSA's banner. While there is little evidence that either Doha or Riyadh actively encouraged this shift towards armed confrontation, both governments were quick to lend support. This was the first time in the Syria crisis that the Gulf states departed considerably from Western policy, which was wary of arming the rebels at this point. Qatar, flushed with its success in Libya, where it had co-sponsored a UN resolution with Britain and France to mandate external military intervention, believed the same could be achieved in Syria. Western powers were more like to intervene if a reliable armed partner existed on the ground, like the rebel foothold in Benghazi in Libya. Saudi also hoped for Western intervention, declaring so in January 2012, but was growing increasingly sceptical of the USA's commitment to its interests in the region.<sup>15</sup> By early June, Western journalists were witnessing Saudi and Qatari representatives handing over arms on the Turkish–Syrian border.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Discussions with British officials, 24 March 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Spencer and Ruth Sherlock, 'Saudi Arabia Calls for Outside Intervention in Syria [*sic*]', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 January 2012. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9031316/Saudi-Arabia-calls-for-outside-intervention-in-Syria.html> (accessed 10 March 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Rania Abuzaid, 'Opening the Weapons Tap: Syria's Rebels Await Fresh and Free Ammo', *Time*, 22 June 2012. Available at <http://world.time.com/2012/06/22/opening-the-weapons-tap-syrias-rebels-await-fresh-and-free-ammo/#ixzz2j7zkZnQl> (accessed 1 October 2013).

However, both states lacked the extensive intelligence networks in Syria to distribute money effectively and instead relied on the personal ties of leading figures.<sup>17</sup> Saudi utilised tribal ties to Syrians, particularly in the southern Houran district, and the personal contacts of Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan, while Qatar's pre-existing links with the Muslim Brotherhood were deployed to dispatch cash and weapons to various militias. Allegedly this action helped shape the character of the armed rebels, with several groups adopting Islamist ideologies to increase their chances of receiving Gulf arms.<sup>18</sup> Money proved the primary tool deployed by each state: by summer 2013, for example, Qatar had spent \$3 billion on the Syrian opposition. Unlike Iran, which invested time and its own Revolutionary Guards to help build up proxy militias in Lebanon and Iraq over several years, ensuring they had some local legitimacy, both Saudi and Qatar sought the quick route of throwing money at loosely formed groups. Much to the chagrin of its enemies, Iran has developed a certain expertise in building up such proxy fighters, while Qatar and Saudi are relative newcomers to this underhand game, and their inexperience showed.

Importantly, Doha and Riyadh did not unite their efforts, choosing instead to arm rival militias and competing factions within the SNC and, after November 2012, its successor the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). This exacerbated the pre-existing tensions within the political leadership. Moaz al-Khatib, first president of the SOC and a respected reconciliation figure, resigned after barely five months, citing interference from external actors. The week before, Qatar had pushed its Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated candidate, Ghassan Hitto, as interim SOC prime minister, causing nine members of the SOC executive to resign. Since Khatib's resignation, Qatar and Saudi have vied to have their clients in prominent positions. Ahmed Jarba, SOC president from July 2013 to July 2014, was seen to be Riyadh's man, being a leader of the *shammar* tribe from eastern Syria, which has branches in Saudi Arabia that were probably the conduit for the relationship.

Divisions have been even more pronounced over the support for different armed groups. Until 2013, Saudi formally supported only the FSA, helping with fighters' salaries. Salim Idriss, the chief of staff appointed when the FSA was reorganised with international support in December 2012, was an ally of Riyadh, as was his successor in February 2014, Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir. However, after US president Barack Obama opted not to punish Assad militarily for deploying chemical weapons in September 2013, Prince Bandar lent considerable support to the *Jaysh al-Islam* (JAI), a group of salafist Islamists not under the FSA umbrella.<sup>19</sup> This shift was prompted by the perceived weakness of the FSA, after the continued success of radical jihadists, JAN and ISIS. Indeed, soon after the creation of JAI, in November 2013 they formed the Islamic Front with other large Islamist militias, specifically dissociating themselves from the SNC and FSA, but also opposing ISIS. To this end, they launched an internal rebel war against ISIS in January 2014.<sup>20</sup> Yet Saudi has continued to support the

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Shapiro, 'The Qatar Problem', *Foreign Policy*, 28 September 2013. Available at [http://mideastaf-rica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/28/the\\_qatar\\_problem](http://mideastaf-rica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/28/the_qatar_problem) (accessed 20 March 2014).

<sup>18</sup> 'Syria's Salafists: Getting Stronger?', *The Economist*, 20 October 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Black, 'Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force', *Guardian*, 7 November 2013. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force> (accessed 21 March 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Hassan Hassan, 'Front to Back', *Foreign Policy*, 4 March 2014. Available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04/islamic\\_front\\_isis\\_syria](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04/islamic_front_isis_syria) (accessed 17 March 2014).

FSA, lobbying the USA to send it more sophisticated weaponry after it reluctantly agreed to end its arms embargo in May 2013, and to deploy more resources towards Syria's southern front, Saudi's preferred theatre.

As a sign of the complexities of the loyalties of Syria's various militias now battling both Assad and each other, the Islamic Front's largest group was actually one of Qatar's closest allies: *Ahrar as-Sham*. Qatar was far quicker to undermine the united structure of the FSA, which it also formally supported, by backing alternative militias. In conjunction with Turkey, Qatar initially backed groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood such as Liwa al-Tawhid, part of the FSA grouping.<sup>21</sup> However, as the opposition radicalised and more extreme salafists and jihadists proved stronger against Assad's forces, and started to peel off former FSA fighters, Qatar switched to the groups it thought were most likely to succeed, backing *Ahrar* and, allegedly, jihadists such as JAN.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, Qatar's switch in favour of more radical groups outside of the FSA seemed to increase as the internal struggle for the leadership between Saudi and Muslim Brotherhood clients turned Saudi's way.

A third Gulf actor has also played a considerable role in backing the armed rebels: private donations from individuals and their associated charities. Through a sophisticated process of public fundraising drives, followed by a complex distribution network of traditional *hawala* moneylenders and bags of cash crossing by boat into Turkey and then Syria, hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised and dispatched by organisations such as the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People (PCSSP).<sup>23</sup> Not being restrained by state policy, these funds were often deliberately sent to the more radical militias, such as *Ahrar*, which in 2012 publicly thanked the PCSSP, supported by the wealthy Kuwaiti Ajmi family, for sending \$400,000.<sup>24</sup> Many have alleged that it is through these groups that jihadists such as ISIS received support. Importantly, many of these Sunni groups, and some of the clerics who have raised funds for them, tend to be overtly sectarian, contributing to the conflict's descent towards ethnic strife. Having lacked a coherent anti-terror financing law until summer 2013, and with the law being hard to enforce even after then, Kuwait has been the clearing house for most of these donations, although donors have come from all over the GCC.<sup>25</sup> The extent to which regimes are complicit in this is open to debate. Saudi, Qatar and others note how integrated their economies are with that of Kuwait, and how many families overlap, making it very difficult to track and prevent the transfer of funds. However, given that Saudi and Qatar have implemented their own strict anti-terror financing laws, they would probably be able to clamp down on all donors were the money going to Assad rather than the opposition.

<sup>21</sup> Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, 'Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military', *New York Times*, 7 December 2012. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html?_r=0) (accessed 10 March 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Amena Bakr, 'Defying Allies, Qatar Unlikely to Abandon Favoured Syria Rebels', *Reuters*, 20 March 2014. Available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/20/syria-crisis-qatar-idUKL6N0LP0Y120140320> (accessed 22 March 2014).

<sup>23</sup> William McCants, 'Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism', *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2013. Available at [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/09/30/the\\_gulf\\_s\\_sectarian\\_syria\\_strategy](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/09/30/the_gulf_s_sectarian_syria_strategy) (accessed 17 March 2014). Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Follow the Money: How Syrian Salafis are Funded from the Gulf', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 23 December 2013. Available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54011> (accessed 17 March 2014).

<sup>24</sup> McCants, 'Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism'.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Dickinson, 'The Syrian War's Private Donors Lose Faith', *New Yorker*, 16 January 2014.

The fact that the funds continued to flow for so long suggests a degree of complicity from all Gulf governments.

A final tool deployed by both Saudi and Qatar in the Syria crisis has been 'soft' or ideational power.<sup>26</sup> Members of the ruling families of Qatar and Saudi own the vast majority of pan-Arab satellite television channels, along with key newspapers and social media hubs. They have thus had a disproportionate role in controlling and promoting a certain message on the Syria crisis to their target audience, the Arab world's Sunnis. Alarming, both have adopted a sectarian tone. Observers have noted that al Jazeera's editorial has been far more in line with Qatari foreign policy since 2011. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, al Jazeera's resident Muslim Brotherhood firebrand, has similarly become more sectarian. Having previously advocated Shi'a–Sunni reconciliation, in 2013 he ranted against Hezbollah and Iran: 'The leader of the party of the Satan [Hezbollah] comes to fight the Sunnis ... Now we know what the Iranians want ... They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis'.<sup>27</sup> Saudi media have been less overt, but have adopted a consistent anti-Assad and anti-Iranian line. At home, Saudi clerics have been vocally anti-Alawite, anti-Shi'a and sectarian in their preaching about Syria.<sup>28</sup> While the Saudi authorities have sought to stem any calls for jihad, there appears to be no opposition to the promotion of a sectarian interpretation of the conflict. This helps amplify the Shi'a threat of Saudi's regional rival Iran to ordinary Sunnis, and seems to enhance Saudi's self-proclaimed position as guardian of the Sunnis. Of course, with the amplifying effect of the Gulf-owned media, this sectarian message has reached far beyond Saudi's and Qatar's borders, encouraging jihadists from other states to head to Syria to fight, and wealthier Gulf individuals to fund militias.<sup>29</sup>

## Achievements

It would be easy to see Gulf actors' engagement in the Syria crisis as a failure. The political and economic pressure Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others placed on Assad did not cow him, while the financial and military support offered to the political and armed opposition groups has not produced a decisive victory or persuaded the West to intervene militarily. Assad remains in Damascus, the conflict goes on, over 250,000 Syrians are dead and over 8 million are displaced or refugees.

Saudi Arabia's regional goals appear to be failing. Iran remains in Syria and ISIS and JAN are growing in strength, while the Muslim Brotherhood retains influence in the SNC, despite the leadership's capture by pro-Saudi allies. Indeed, in spring 2014 Prince Bandar was removed from the Syria file and replaced by Interior Minister Mohammad bin Nayef, suggesting an admission that the past three years' efforts had failed. However, that is only part of the story. Iran's reputation has been greatly damaged by the Syria conflict, with Saudi successfully mobilising the Sunni Arab street against Tehran, in a way it failed to do throughout the 2000s. Whatever ideational threat Iran posed in the past has been killed in Syria. While ISIS and other jihadists and the Muslim Brotherhood remain a danger,

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> 'Syria Conflict: Cleric Qaradawi Urges Sunnis to Join Rebels', *BBC News*, 13 January 2013. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22741588> (accessed 1 March 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Wehrey, 'Saudi Arabia Reins In its Clerics on Syria'.

<sup>29</sup> Dickinson, 'Follow the Money'.



the presence of other, often Saudi-backed, groups means none has yet succeeded in dominating the opposition and, should Assad ever fall, neither is any one of them likely to command absolute power. Moreover, domestically Saudi's goals have largely been achieved. The popular revolt sparked by the Arab Spring has been drowned in Syria's bloodbath, seemingly putting off any would-be Saudi revolutionaries. However, the sectarianism deliberately pushed may come back to haunt Riyadh. Not only might jihadists who have slipped past Saudi's embargoes return to challenge the regime, but by raising expectations so high that Riyadh is defending the region's Sunnis, Saudi might be inviting future domestic, and regional, trouble were Assad to eventually triumph.

Qatar can also take some solace from its record in Syria. Its goal of boosting its regional profile has certainly been achieved, although its desire to form a friendly government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has not. However, its alleged links to Syria's jihadists have damaged its hard-earned reputation on the Arab street. Al Jazeera is no longer regarded as the people's friend in the way it once was. More importantly, the regional context from which Qatar benefited in 2011 has since shifted against it, with its Muslim Brotherhood allies losing power in Egypt. This, in turn, has placed Qatar on a collision course with Saudi and its GCC allies who withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014, due to Qatar's continued support for both the Brotherhood and Syria's jihadists. With the resources at its disposal and a very small and satisfied domestic population to worry about, few expect Tamim and his still influential father, Hamid, to change tack.<sup>30</sup> However, this does illustrate how Gulf intervention in the Syria crisis has had serious reverberations in regional relations, and Qatar's intervention in Syria may have cost it.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to answer three questions concerning Gulf actors' role in the Syria crisis. It questioned the extent to which sectarianism has driven engagement and has suggested that interests have proven far more of a driver than sectarian identity. Individuals and charities from the Gulf have been motivated to back sectarian militias and jihadists due to ideological reasons, quite possibly mobilised by the language encouraged by Qatar and Saudi Arabia in pan-Arab media and sermons. However, these identities have been instrumentalised by both regimes to pursue their regional and domestic interests. Saudi Arabia in particular, while posing as the defender of Sunnism, has been primarily concerned with containing domestic threats and gaining domestic and regional support for its rivalry with Iran, finding sectarianism a useful tool. Its willingness for détente with Assad prior to 2011 illustrates a cold realism based on anti-Iranian state interests rather than anti-Shi'a ideology. Moreover, the willingness of both Qatar and Saudi Arabia to back Syrian militias of various ideological hues again suggests pragmatism. Though Qatar has shown itself to be the most fleeting with its support, quickly backing groups beyond its traditional Muslim Brotherhood allies once they seemed to be more successful, whether jihadist, salafist or moderate, even Saudi Arabia was willing to diversify its support away from the official FSA once it believed the radicals were in the ascendancy.

<sup>30</sup> Bilal Y. Saab, 'Break Up in the Gulf', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 March 2014. Available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141006/bilal-y-saab/break-up-in-the-gulf> (accessed 17 March 2014).

The second question was whether the Gulf States had the capacity and capability to affect the course of conflict to fulfil their goals, and this paper has suggested that this capacity is limited. Both states have shown impatience in trying to effect change in Syria. The speed with which they ratcheted up moves against Assad in 2011–12 suggests a reactive approach rather than any grand strategy. In fairness, many actors, including the West, were guilty of this, particularly the assumption that Assad would easily fall. Yet Saudi and Qatar compounded this by hastily backing armed groups, without an established intelligence and distribution network. Instead, private and tribal contacts have been the root of relationships with the Syrian opposition, rather than those that necessarily have a base of support on the ground. Moreover, as discussed above, both Saudi and Qatar were willing to switch allegiance to other groups relatively swiftly, given that it was mostly only money being invested, not time, troops or equipment – a sharp contrast to Iran’s patient experience building militias in Lebanon and Iraq. Importantly, Saudi and Qatar from the beginning backed different factions and, eventually, different armed groups, prioritising their own interests over the defeat of Assad. These factors have played a major role in the fragmentation of the opposition and in its inability to unite and forge a viable military and political coalition against Assad. Certainly that opposition is not one that would attract confident external intervention.

The final question was what the impact of Gulf policy has been on the Syria crisis. It is clear from this paper that the impact has not been positive. Support has been given, whether directly or indirectly, to jihadist groups, boosting JAN and ISIS; sectarian language has been encouraged, exacerbating the confessionalisation of the civil war; and factionalism in the political opposition has been encouraged as Saudi and Qatar have worked at cross-purposes, while their support of various militias has ensured a lack of unity in the forces fighting Assad. However, a few caveats should be added. First, these trends all existed in Syria prior to the conflict, and Gulf intervention has exacerbated rather than created them. Secondly, Syria has not existed in a bubble since 2011, and regional developments, most notably in Libya in 2011 and Egypt in 2013, have affected the changing calculations of Qatar and Saudi in particular with regard to Syria. Finally, the Gulf actors are by no means unique in their negative impact on the conflict. Indeed, it would be fair to say that all the actors involved, whether Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the other Gulf states, Iran, Russia, Turkey or the West, have contributed considerably to the miserable position of Syria today.

## From Doha with Love: Gulf Foreign Policy in Libya

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Libya's civil war turned into an international affair not in New York or Washington, but in Abu Dhabi, of all places; on the evening of 7 March 2011 – just three weeks after the conflict began – when the Gulf foreign ministers issued a statement demanding ‘that the Security Council take the steps necessary to protect civilians, including a no-fly zone in Libya’.<sup>1</sup> The call was soon followed by the League of Arab States – whose council was then chaired by Oman – and then the United Nations, ultimately leading to NATO's Operation Unified Protector in which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar participated militarily. What turned out to be the first UN-mandated R2P (Responsibility to Protect)<sup>2</sup> operation therefore began in the Gulf. Considering that the protection of human rights has, so far, not played any role in the foreign policy of Qatar or the UAE, it is fair to ask what their motivations in bringing the Qaddafi regime down were. What was it the Gulf states sought to achieve in Libya, and with what available means?

### Two Birds, One Stone: The War of 2011

The two Gulf states which were most active in Libya were the UAE and Qatar; their objectives overlapped but were not identical, as their 2014 fallout showed. Both states were keen on removing a regime which had given them trouble in the past, fostering international relations (amongst others with NATO, with which both states have had a partnership since 2004) potentially helpful in a future antagonism, and projecting power. For Qatar, an additional element was at stake: reinforcing its pan-Arab narrative, which is the main feature of its foreign policy.

From a theoretical point of view, both realist and constructivist explanations come into play: in a typically realist narrative, Qatar and the UAE sought to maximise state security by accumulation of power as well as balancing, not only through projecting military clout and forming an alliance with international actors, but also by removing a regime which had been an active threat to Gulf states in general.

<sup>1</sup> Kareem Shaheen, ‘GCC Wants No-Fly Zone over Libya’, *National*, 8 March 2011. Available at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/politics/gcc-wants-no-fly-zone-over-libya>.

<sup>2</sup> Responsibility to Protect is an emerging UN norm which posits that state sovereignty can be overruled if major human rights violations take place.

Relations between the Gulf and Libya had been rocky ever since Qaddafi came to power in a coup in 1969; friendly relations between King Idris (his predecessor) and the Gulf monarchies were replaced with tensions. These were in part the result of different ideologies, with Qaddafi seeing himself as a revolutionary overthrowing anarchic feudal systems, and in part the result of divergent oil policies. Due to Libya's limited oil reserves – in 2013, it was said to have 48.47 billion barrels versus the UAE's 97.80 billion or Saudi Arabia's 265.85 billion<sup>3</sup> – it proved to be more hawkish regarding oil export policies, and criticised in particular the UAE and Kuwait for their moderate oil price policy. Qaddafi differed with the Gulf states on other accounts, too. He supported the Dhofar rebellion aiming at the overthrow of the Sultanate of Oman, Iran in its war with Iraq, and Iraq during its occupation of Kuwait. In 2000, Libya recalled its ambassador from Doha in response to an al Jazeera programme critical of the Libyan government.<sup>4</sup> When the uprising began in Benghazi, there was therefore no love lost between Qaddafi and the Gulf states; the removal of an antagonistic regime in Tripoli supported state security objectives at the regional level.

But the war gave the Gulf states, in particular Qatar and the UAE, an opportunity to expand their rather long-standing strategy of internationalising Gulf security. This is reflected in substantial foreign presence and a network of international alliances: Qatar has hosted a US air base since 2003 (it moved there from Saudi Arabia, where it had been since 1991); the UAE has been home to a French base since 2009; an American naval base has been in Bahrain since 1971, and several US bases are in Kuwait; Great Britain, although not permanently based in the Gulf, regularly conducts exercises in the UAE and Bahrain and has military personnel seconded to the armed forces of Saudi Arabia and Oman.<sup>5</sup> In 2004, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Bahrain joined NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Internationalisation is a strategy which directly opposes Iran's, repeatedly calling for a regionalisation of Gulf security and the departure of all foreign military presence. The successful internationalisation of the Libyan conflict – and the repeated attempts to do the same with Syria – supports the thesis that Gulf foreign policy seeks to counterbalance the regional set-up with foreign support. Actively participating in a NATO-led operation, until then an unheard-of idea, therefore folded into this strategy.

The novelty in this decision was not so much the support of a Western mission – after all, the Gulf states had supported the war against Iraq in 1991, and to some extent in 2003 – but the fact that both the UAE and Qatar did this with actual military force. In this, they broke the Arab taboo on military interference in internal Arab affairs. But an actual military operation was necessary to project military power. This was particularly important for Qatar, whose armed force is the smallest in the region with 11,800 troops (aside from Bahrain, which has 8,200; in comparison, the UAE has 51,000).<sup>6</sup> In the context of generally rising tension with Iran, all Gulf states have tripled their military expenditure since 2003 –

<sup>3</sup> Qatar has less oil than Libya, with 25.54 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, but significantly more gas, which it began exporting only after 1996. See Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, *Member Countries*. Available at [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/about\\_us/25.htm](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/25.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Malcom C. Peck, *Historical Dictionary of the Gulf States* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, 'A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf', *RUSI Briefing Paper*, April 2013. Available at [https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/East\\_of\\_Suez\\_Return\\_042013.pdf](https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/East_of_Suez_Return_042013.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2013* (London: Routledge, 2013).

the year the 'Eastern Arab Gate' of Iraq was invaded (and therefore weakened) and rumours of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme intensified.<sup>7</sup> Doha, which shares a gas field with Teheran, has actively countered Iranian activities in the region while remaining cordial with the regime. While neither the UAE nor Qatar alone would be a match for Iran's armed forces of 523,000 (not counting paramilitary and reserve forces), their participation in toppling the Libyan regime projects a military willingness as well as an emerging air force expertise potentially acting as deterrent factors.

In addition to these realist considerations, constructivist explanations are also valid. This applies in particular to Qatar, whose overly active foreign policy in the last decade can be explained by the supra-state identity of pan-Arabism. Constructivism posits that identities 'inspire trans-state movements, and constrain purely state-centric behaviour'.<sup>8</sup> Pan-Arabism, essentially a set of dense trans-state cultural and political ties transcending Middle Eastern and North African states, has been both used and fought by Arab states which either sought to employ it to maximise their power and gain legitimacy, or felt threatened precisely by its state-transcending and therefore sovereignty-limiting potential. The popular appeal of Arabism can be particularly used by regimes which are lacking legitimacy, such as autocratic or absolutely monarchic systems. More often than not, Arab leaders have paid lip service to the Arab cause (*raison de la nation*) to gain popularity, while conducting a foreign policy based on state-centric considerations (*raison d'état*). One could argue that, while the narrative looks constructivist, it is in fact realist.

Winning all-Arab leadership, beyond the limits of an individual state, occurs by winning over public opinion chiefly by 'outbidding' rivals in the promotion of the Arab cause. Due to its mobilising power, pan-Arabism (albeit often considered a dead political project in the sense of unification) is still a powerful tool in Arab foreign policy, and has been deliberately used by Qatar to promote its own status as it recognises this still mobilising dimension. And it has reason to do so: since 2008, Arab country identification has been on the decline, with Arab or Muslim identity ranking higher. According to another survey, 72 per cent of Arabs see themselves as one nation.<sup>9</sup>

As Gulf foreign policy remains determined, by and large, by small decision-making circles (not to say individuals), their opinions and convictions are key to understanding the policy's features. Qatar's Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, who abdicated in favour of his son in 2013, was a self-declared Nasserist; Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's strongman and long-time hero of the Arab cause, inspired a whole movement which believed Arabism needed a leading country in order to achieve political unity. Both Nasser and the Emir had a military career before turning to politics, and both believed in the media to spread the Arab cause – one founded the influential radio station *Sawt al-Arab* ('Voice of the Arabs'), the other al Jazeera ('The Peninsula'), resting on the one factor that unifies 350 million people and will

<sup>7</sup> SIPRI, *Military Expenditures*. Available at <http://portal.sipri.org/publications/pages/expenditures/splash-expenditures>.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds), *The Foreign Policy of Middle Eastern States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 'The Arab Opinion Project: The Arab Opinion Index', April 2012, p. 73. Available at <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5083cf8e-38f8-4e4a-8bc5-fc91660608b0>. Shibley Telhami, *The World Through Arab Eyes: Arab Public Opinion and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), pp. 17–35.

continue to supersede Arab state division: the Arabic language. Created in 1996, only a year after Sheikh Hamad's ascent to power, al Jazeera was the first to appeal to an Arab (rather than national) audience. In his statement of abdication, the Emir repeatedly stressed the Arab dimension of Qatar as a nation, declaring that 'I am confident that you are fully aware of your loyalty and of your Arab and Muslim identity; I urge you to preserve our civilised traditional and cultural values, originating from our religion, Arab identity and above all our humanity; as we believe that the Arab World is one human body; one coherent structure; it prospers if all its parts are prosperous'.<sup>10</sup>

Its active participation in the fall of Qaddafi is therefore only one of several manoeuvres Doha has performed under the pan-Arab banner - Qaddafi had betrayed the Arab cause, after all, by supporting Iran during its war with Iraq, just as Syria's Hafez al-Assad had done. More importantly, Qatar had sided with the popular Arab Spring uprisings early on via al Jazeera and wanted to support its choice consistently. The mandate of both the GCC and the League of Arab States legitimised this action. Elsewhere, Qatar has acted in the same spirit: by supporting the Palestinian cause (the mother of all Arab foreign policy files) to outrun Iran more actively than any other Arab state today,<sup>11</sup> and by mediating between fighting Arab factions (such as in Lebanon in 2008).

## A War on Three Fronts

Two tactical goals were to be achieved in Libya: the toppling of Qaddafi's regime, and the installing of a Gulf-friendly government afterwards. To that effect, Qatar and the UAE both used military means, while Qatar added strategic communication efforts, as well as overt political and financial support to Libyan rebels, to the equation.

The military campaign was for both countries a novel experience; neither had extensive combat practice, since their participation in Operation Desert Storm against Iraq was mainly logistic and even so limited. The UAE sent twelve aircraft, of which six were F-16 Block 60 fighter jets and six Mirage 2000s. The F-16 in particular is one of the most advanced fighter aircraft ever produced. Qatar, whose air combat capacity is dwarfed by the UAE (12 versus 142), sent six Mirage 2000s, which constituted half of its fighter jets at the time. Mobilised faster than the UAE's, they were part of the first sorties flown alongside those of France.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Telhami, *The World Through Arab Eyes*, p. 52. Al Jazeera, 'Qatar's Emir Transfers Power to Son', 25 June 2013. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013625516403468.html>. *Jerusalem Post*, 'TERRA INCOGNITA: Filling Nasser's Shoes', 25 August 2014. Available at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/TERRA-INCOGNITA-Filling-Nassers-shoes-372298>. Shibley Telhami, 'Behind the Abdication of Qatar's Emir', *Reuters*, 26 June 2013. Available at <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/06/26/behind-the-abdication-of-qatars-emir>.

<sup>11</sup> Qatar's emir visited Gaza in 2012 as the first head of state to do so since the Israeli-imposed blockade, has offered a home to Hamas' headquarters following its departure from Damascus, is rumoured to be behind the Palestinian statehood-bid at the United Nations, has invested \$1 billion in West Bank construction, helped the Palestinian authority out of a financial rut in 2013 and facilitated reconciliation talks between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford Krauss, 'For Qatar, Libyan Intervention May Be a Turning Point', *New York Times*, 3 April 2011. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/middleeast/04qatar.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/middleeast/04qatar.html?_r=0). *Jerusalem Post*, 'UAE and Qatar Pack an Arab Punch in Libya Operation', 31 March 2011. Available at <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/UAE-and-Qatar-pack-an-Arab-punch-in-Libya-operation>. Christos Theodorides, 'Qatar Becomes 1st Arab Country to Fly over Libya', *USA Today*, 25 March 2011. Available at [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-03-25-libya-qatar\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-03-25-libya-qatar_N.htm).



These matched the contributions of other participating states such as Sweden or Turkey, but were outmatched by the United Kingdom and France with 28 and 29 aircraft respectively. Neither Qatar nor the UAE ended up striking targets (with the latter rumoured to have struck once), but the strategic message was enough.<sup>13</sup>

Qatar went further than implementing UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 just from the air; Chief of Staff Major General Hamad bin Ali al-Atiya openly admitted that 'the numbers of Qataris on ground were hundreds in every region'. Qataris were running training and communication operations and supervised strategic plans, both in Libya and from Doha. 'Qatar had supervised the rebels' plans because they are civilians and did not have enough military experience. We acted as the link between the rebels and NATO forces', al-Atiya added. National Transitional Council (NTC) chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil confirmed that Qatar had been 'a major partner in all the battles we fought'<sup>14</sup> – Qatari Special Forces are said to be the ones which led the final assault on Tripoli in summer 2011.

While this arguably stretched the UN's exclusion of 'a foreign occupation force of any form', other states sent small numbers of trainers into Libya too – only they notified the UN in time, which neither the UAE nor Qatar did. Similarly, four states (France, Italy, the UK and the USA) declared their intention to deliver weapons to the rebels in order to ensure protection of civilians, thereby infringing the Resolution's arms embargo (as well as the non-exportation declaration it had signed with several of its own arms suppliers). Qatar failed to notify the UN of such weapons deliveries (which included French-made Milan anti-tank missiles and Belgian-made FN assault rifles), and its UN mission denied doing so upon inquiry although evidence suggested otherwise.<sup>15</sup> This stood somewhat in contrast to a statement made by Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem, Qatar's prime minister and foreign minister, a month into the conflict, in which he said that UNSCR 1973 allowed the delivery of 'defensive weapons' to opposition forces struggling to fight Libyan armour. As the UN noted in its report, around 20 flights delivered military materiel from Qatar to the rebel forces, amounting to a total of US\$2 billion. The UAE was even less cooperative than Qatar; its representatives replied to UN enquiries 'that NATO would be in a better position to answer those questions: [...] NATO was at the time responsible for the enforcement of the no-fly zone and the maritime embargo and was in possession of lists of the materiel that was delivered'.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to military support both from the air and on the ground, Qatar lent considerable political and economic support to the NTC and its rebel forces. It was not only the first Arab country to recognise the NTC as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people (a step the UAE took only three months later and Saudi Arabia seven months after that), but also assisted in selling 1 million barrels of Libyan oil on behalf of the rebels – for which it paid almost regular market rate – as a way to circumvent the international sanctions and help the NTC keep its staff on pay. Later, Qatar supplied the Libyan rebels with gas and diesel, and granted Moussa Koussa, a high-profile defector from the Qaddafi regime, a home in Doha.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Qatari and Emirati military officers, Doha and Abu Dhabi, spring 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Al Arabiya with Agencies, 'Qatar Admits it Had Boots on the Ground in Libya; NTC Seeks Further NATO Help', *al Arabiya News*, 26 October 2011. Available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/26/173833.html>.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) Concerning Libya*, 20 March 2012, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Within days of the military operation, Qatar supported the creation of a rebel satellite channel called *Libya likull el Ahrar* ('Libya for All the Free'), which started sending from Doha with the logistical and technical support of a smaller Qatari station, *al Rayyan*.<sup>17</sup> Clearly replicating its own al Jazeera experience, Qatar recognised the importance of strategic communication as a separate battlefield. While Qaddafi sought to hire an American public relations firm to brand his war, his ten TV stations continued to send images of civilian casualties inflicted by the international coalition.<sup>18</sup> In July 2011, NATO deliberately struck Libyan state TV, arguing that our intervention was necessary as TV was being used as an integral component of the regime apparatus designed to systematically oppress and threaten civilians and to incite attacks against them. Qaddafi's increasing practice of inflammatory broadcasts illustrates his regime's policy to instill hatred amongst Libyans, to mobilise its supporters against civilians and to trigger bloodshed.<sup>19</sup>

Al Jazeera itself continued to cover the Libyan conflict extensively and in clear support of regime change. In an interview in February 2011 with the pan-Arab daily *al Sharq al Awsat*, Qaddafi's son Seif al-Islam said outright, 'Screw Qatar and al Jazeera'.<sup>20</sup>

## Mission Accomplished – Almost

'Qatar has been a great ally from Day One', Mustafa Gheriani, spokesman for the rebel Benghazi city council, declared in March 2011. 'It's an Arab country to be proud of'.<sup>21</sup> Less than a year later, Libyan Army General Khalifa Hiftar, an early Qaddafi opponent who joined the rebel forces, declared that 'if aid comes through the front door, we like Qatar. But if it comes through the window to certain people [and] bypassing official channels, we don't want Qatar'.<sup>22</sup> Demonstrators in the streets of Benghazi and Tripoli began to chant 'No to Qatar's agenda, Libya is a free and independent state'.<sup>23</sup>

Within a few months, the enthusiastic relationship between Qatar and the Libyan revolutionaries had evaporated; from a time when Libyan street vendors were selling Qatari flags to the denial to Qatar Airways flights of permission to land, something had gone awry in the relationship between the rebels and the emirate.<sup>24</sup> Allegations of Qatari liaisons with Libyan

<sup>17</sup> Blake Hounshell, 'The Revolution Will Soon Be Televised', *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2011. Available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/28/the\\_revolution\\_will\\_soon\\_be\\_televised](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/28/the_revolution_will_soon_be_televised).

<sup>18</sup> Brad Hilton, 'From New York Post: Qaddafi Looking to Hire a NY PR Rep to Clean up Image', *Al Arabiya News*, 31 July 2011. Available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/31/160240.html>.

<sup>19</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, 'NATO Strikes at Libyan State TV', *New York Times*, 30 July 2011. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/world/africa/31tripoli.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/world/africa/31tripoli.html?_r=0).

<sup>20</sup> Hounshell, 'The Revolution Will Soon Be Televised'.

<sup>21</sup> Theodorides, 'Qatar Becomes 1st Arab Country to Fly over Libya'.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Sotloff, 'Why the Libyans Have Fallen Out of Love with Qatar', *Time*, 2 January 2012. Available at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2103409,00.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Maha Ellawati, 'Demonstrators Demand Federalist State, Denounce Tunisia Deal and Qatar, in Baida and Benghazi', *Libya Herald*, 27 November 2012. Available at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/11/27/demonstrators-demand-federalist-state-denounce-tunisia-deal-and-qatar-in-baida-and-benghazi/#ixzz2wmeDjfcC>.

<sup>24</sup> Ashraf Abdul Wahab, 'Gunmen at Tripoli Airport Prevent Qatar Airways Plane Landing', *Libya Herald*, 4 August 2013. Available at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2013/08/04/gunmen-at-tripoli-airport-prevent-qatar-airways-plane-landing/#ixzz2wmWoVkcH>.

women, although probably part of a smear campaign, infuriated the Libyan public further.<sup>25</sup> Relations with the UAE are somewhat better – it was praised by Prime Minister Zeidan for sending medical staff following tribal clashes<sup>26</sup> – but its diplomatic mission has been a target of rocket strikes just as many other foreign missions have been.

Although the Gulf states have achieved their first objective – the removal of a regime, the strengthening of their international ties – they have not achieved the second, namely the installing of a friendly regime. That being said, the current Libyan government cannot be said to be either cohesive or consistent in its foreign policy; nevertheless, the generally Qatar-hostile popular sentiment has limited Doha's room for engagement with the new Libya considerably.

At the centre of the rift stands the accusation of Qatar's meddling with internal Libyan affairs, which is code for Doha being overly close to Libyan Islamists, such as Qaddafi's opponent Ali al-Sallabi, who spent years in Qatari exile, and Abdel Hakim Belhaj. The accusation has been reiterated most recently by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, which withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014, and was flanked by the demand to close down al Jazeera. This is not the first time for Saudi Arabia, which left its ambassadorial post in Doha vacant between 2002 and 2008 after falling out over the Qatari TV channel. Perhaps more worryingly, the UAE and Bahrain have joined the ranks of those criticising Qatar's Islamist-friendly policy, not only in Libya but in particular in Egypt (where four Al Jazeera journalists are on trial for supporting terrorism).

While it is true that Qatar has sided with Islamist groups during the Arab Spring, their outlook and agenda has been so divergent that it can hardly be considered an ideological move. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood share very little with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group – in fact, they are political opponents. Rather, Qatar sees political Islam as a surrogate for pan-Arabism, with which it shares a state-transcending, unifying aspect. This is therefore only a logical continuation of Qatar's foreign policy, seeking legitimacy and power by resting on popular regional sentiment. The recent move by its three Gulf neighbours oddly confirms the success of its policy, since it can be seen as counterbalancing a state which is not just 'punching above its weight'; rather, Qatar has correctly identified a still powerful source to tap in order to consolidate its power not only inside but also beyond its tiny territory.

<sup>25</sup> Ryszard Bouvier and Nihal Zaroug, 'Controversy Engulfs UN Ambassador over Claims of "Beautiful Nights" between Qatari Officials and Libyan Girls', *Libya Herald*, 22 November 2012. Available at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/11/22/controversy-engulfs-un-ambassador-over-claims-of-beautiful-nights-between-qatari-officials-and-libyan-girls/#ixzz2wmYQZzEK>.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmed Elumami, 'UAE Sends Medical Team and Supplies to Sebha', *Libya Herald*, 14 January 2014. Available at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2014/01/14/uae-sends-medical-team-and-supplies-to-sebha/#ixzz2wmdaoEr3>.



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