



INSS Insight No. 258, May 22, 2011

The GCC at 30: Shaking off the Dust?

Yoel Guzansky

In May 1981 the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman approved the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) charter with the objective of increased "coordination, integration and interconnection between member states in all fields." Although security was a key factor in the alliance's formation, the GCC has so far been unable to present a united stance on this central issue, which has affected its ability to deal with the growing threats from Iran.

The fear of revolutionary Iran and the potential spillover of the Iran-Iraq War made the Gulf countries realize that they needed to counter regional threats through alignment. Since then, GCC countries have conducted themselves relatively passively and for the most part have remained on the sidelines of the effort to curb Iran's march towards nuclear weapons. Yet the current instability in the area has brought this tension to the surface, and one can even identify an adjustment in strategy and the adoption of more assertive stance that has reinvigorated this loose alliance.

The entry of the joint Peninsula Shield Force into Bahrain (along with a generous aid package), besides trying to protect the regime and prevent the spread of the protests to the Saudi Shiite population, was intended to signal that Bahrain is deep within the GCC's sphere of influence, and to make it clear that the GCC states are, as they said: "not Lebanon or Iraq." In turn, the Iranian parliament warned that the GCC was "playing with fire" by sending "occupation" troops to Bahrain, setting the stage for the paramilitary Basij (best known for its role in suppressing demonstrations in Iran after the June 2009 elections) to throw Molotov cocktails at the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran while shouting "death to the Saud family."

In other points of friction, Kuwait and Bahrain identified separate Iranian espionage cells and withdrew their diplomats from Tehran while expelling Iranian diplomats, and a letter signed by all six GCC countries was sent to the Security Council calling on the UN "to halt Iranian interference in Gulf affairs." In addition, Prince Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi ambassador to the US and to Britain, said the GCC should "prevent others [i.e., Iran] from

dictating its options... and for the first time since its formation the GCC is forced to rethink its strategy". In a few extraordinary meetings in April and May the foreign ministers of the GCC publicly denounced "blatant Iranian interference" in their internal affairs and Tehran's "plotting against their national security."

This is no small matter because the GCC countries generally tend to restrain their public remarks on Iran and because they previously had no uniform policy on the matter. Outside the Gulf, the GCC is also showing greater unity. The six backed a no-fly zone in Libya with the UAE joining Qatar in sending fighter jets and also intensively mediating in Yemen, trying to ease the transition of power from the embattled president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

While concerns about Iran are shared, each Gulf country so far has conducted its own cost-benefit analysis, leading each to adopt a different policy for the containment of Iran's ambitions. Qatar and Oman, for example, while acknowledging the severity of the threat from Tehran (as the leaked State Department cables have shown) prefer to appease rather than confront Iran. However, the situation may be changing. Cooperation appears more important than ever in light of the increased threats in and around the Gulf and some adjustments in the GCC states' traditional policies can be identified.

First, the Arab Gulf is in the midst of one of the biggest conventional arms races it has ever experienced, with an emphasis on acquisition of advanced fighter planes and anti-missile defense systems, possibly totaling more than \$120 billion over the next several years. This goes hand-in-hand with America's containment policy vis-à-vis Iran and points to the need to respond to Iran's arsenal of menacing surface-to-surface missiles. These systems would help the Gulf states repel a future Iranian attack.

Second, in recent years there has been a "nuclear renaissance" in the Gulf, where the primary motive for the GCC civilian nuclear programs is Iran's nuclear ambitions, even if for obvious reasons there has been no public acknowledgment of this. The GCC countries have so far progressed transparently and in cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog. To this end, most have signed agreements waiving nuclear fuel cycle capabilities, which may serve as an alternative model to Iran's. This effort is primarily meant to signal that the GCC states are capable – even if they are not necessarily interested in doing so at this time – of developing nuclear programs as a deterrent to Iran's advancing nuclear weapon program. Though this may also be motivated by considerations of prestige and modernization, it represents a symbolic response to Iran and is meant to send the latter a clear message of "we can, too."

Third, the GCC states have declared their intention to strengthen the Peninsula Shield Force. According to recently announced plans, the PSF's primary function will be "to provide a response to security threats in the Gulf." Despite the PSF's relative weakness, it has had some successes: establishment of a joint headquarters with a permanent

command, joint exercises, and a few deployments, the most recent of these in Bahrain, to tackle – for the first time – an internal threat.

Fourth, the "Arab spring" pushed the GCC to try to immunize the regimes from potential risks and bolster their legitimacy. In recent weeks there are indications that Saudi Arabia, in many ways the driving force behind the GCC, hopes to invite Jordan and Morocco, which are conservative, pro-Western monarchies, "to apply for membership" in the alliance.

The GCC can still do more, from containment of a large share of illegal trade with Iran to the increase of oil production in the event of a future crisis with Iran. In any case, they need clear US backing, as doubts about America's commitment to the region's future security are rising. The last 30 years have shown that when external threats grow, tensions between the GCC countries decrease and more cooperation is visible. This is also the case now when the monarchs understand that if they want to preserve their regimes they need to maintain some unity and make a concerted effort to let go of their disagreements.

An adoption of a joint security and foreign policy is needed – a move, as some in the Gulf suggest, from cooperation to confederation and from a sub-regional to a regional organization (with the possible addition of Jordan and Morocco). Indeed, an assertive stance may signal a more decisive role for the GCC and have the potential to strengthen its contribution to regional security at a time when it is most critically needed.

