



# The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring. Between Outreach, Patronage and Repression

**Silvia Colombo**

## **Abstract**

In 2011 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been confronted with increasing challenges stemming from the Arab uprisings. Internally they have had to face popular mobilization and discontent, triggering a mixed reaction made up of economic handouts, patronage, limited political and economic reforms as well as military intervention and repression. Externally they have actively intervened in support of the protest movements in Syria and Libya and enthusiastically facilitated president Saleh's departure from Yemen. At first sight these responses may seem schizophrenic. At closer inspection, though, managing instability by shoring up friendly regimes on the inside and expanding the GCC's influence outside represent two sides of the same coin. This paper aims at unpacking the GCC's responses to the "Arab Spring" by making use of the concept of "double standard". It is argued that three main dichotomies - inside vs. outside, monarchies vs. republics and Sunnis vs. Shiites - explain the GCC's reaction and its implications for the future of the MENA region.

**Keywords:** *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) / Gulf countries / Saudi Arabia / Qatar / Arab revolts / Double standard policy / Patronage / Military intervention / Sectarianism / Iran / Oman / Bahrain / Libya / Syria*

## The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring. Between Outreach, Patronage and Repression

by Silvia Colombo\*

### Introduction

Since 2011 the political landscape of the Arab countries has been dramatically transformed by the events of the so called “Arab Spring”. After decades of ingrained authoritarianism, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria have embarked on a process aimed at creating more inclusive political systems based on the rule of law and accountable governance. The movement had many causes, but essentially came out of long-simmering and closely interlinked political, economic and social dissatisfaction. This in turn stemmed from the repression of political, civil and media freedoms, poor governance and economic malaise, compounded by corruption, nepotism, unemployment and lack of opportunities.

The chain reaction which started in Tunisia and then spread across the Arab world reached the shores of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political and economic union made up of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Almost all GCC countries have witnessed some sort of public protest in one form or another. Bahrain and Oman witnessed prolonged street protests, while other GCC countries experienced short-lived public and even virtual protests. In some cases, protests turned violent and disruptive, resulting in deaths and imprisonment of some of the protestors as well as other forms of punishment, such as the revocation of citizenship. At the same time, however, the GCC has played an important role in supporting the Arab Spring in other Arab countries such as Libya, Yemen and Syria. Here, support has come in different forms, but overall the GCC has sided with the protestors offering media and diplomatic backing - often within larger assemblies such as the Arab League - more than attempting a mediation between the conflicting parties.

This paper aims at assessing the GCC’s reaction to the Arab Spring pointing to the striking “double standard” between its response in its own physical and symbolic space, i.e., the Gulf region and the ruling monarchies in other Arab states, such as Jordan and Morocco, and outside it. The paper unpacks the GCC’s responses to the Arab Spring in the short term, without delving into the root causes of the Arab Spring, which are present also in the Gulf region. Within the GCC states, the reaction to the uprisings has been a mix of economic handouts, use of patronage, limited political and economic reforms as well as domestic repression and even military intervention. While the GCC ruling families continue to enjoy a degree of legitimacy, the question remains whether they can succeed in riding mounting pressure over time. Outside the Gulf

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\* Silvia Colombo is Researcher at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

area, the GCC has reached out to the protestors and actively supported them against incumbent authoritarian regimes, albeit with mixed results so far.

It remains uncertain whether the Gulf states can endure the tension embedded in this differentiated approach. In the long run, it is possible that this double standard policy will induce Gulf regimes to integrate further in order to reduce domestic vulnerability to popular demands for greater freedom and accountability. Outside the Gulf area, the GCC policy of supporting protests might turn into a policy of support for friendly political forces, in particular Islam-rooted movements and parties, irrespective of their democratic credentials. In fact, in the opinion of some external experts, this process has already begun.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, GCC countries are backed by Western powers, which hope that cooptation within the GCC could moderate the anti-Western instincts of Islamist forces. From this perspective, the double standard approach followed by GCC countries emerges as less schizophrenic than first meets the eye. Internal repression and support for revolutionary Islamist forces appear as the two sides of the same coin, as they are seen as conducive to greater influence of the GCC states both in the Gulf and in North Africa and the Middle East. Unsurprisingly, the GCC has been particularly keen to back revolutionary movements opposing unfriendly regimes, such as Gaddafi's Libya or Assad's Syria. All this evidently does not bode well for the stability and political development of the Arab world in the years ahead.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces the concept of "double standard" and its usefulness to describe the GCC countries' responses to the Arab Spring. The central part of the paper explains and assesses the GCC's reaction by making reference to three dichotomies: inside versus outside the Gulf area; monarchies vs. republics; Sunni vs. Shiite. The last section draws some general conclusions and attempts a prediction of how this GCC's double standard approach towards the Arab Spring is likely to impact on the strategic outlook of the Arab region.

## 1. The "Arab Spring" reaches the Gulf shores

What will go down in history as the "Arab Spring" is a complex political phenomenon that goes beyond the uprisings and the fall of some dictators that kept millions of people glued to computer monitors, television screens and mobile phones in the early months of 2011.<sup>2</sup> The "Arab Spring" is the result of a complex interplay of structure, agency, intention and contingency that must be unpacked to assess the consequences that these processes will have both in their individual country-based trajectories and in their cumulative, regional footprint.

A number of concepts can be useful to unpack this political phenomenon and reach a theoretically relevant explanation. Among such concepts, the presence of common grievances, the unsustainability of the state, the logic of deliberate diffusion and demonstration effects are all relevant to understand the unprecedented mass

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<sup>1</sup> Khalil al Anani, "The Advent of 'Informal' Islamists", in *The Middle East Channel*, 19 March 2012, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/19/the\\_advent\\_of\\_informal\\_islamists](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/19/the_advent_of_informal_islamists).

<sup>2</sup> Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East", in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 2012), p. 127-149.

mobilization witnessed in the Arab world in 2011.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the fact that political, economic, demographic and social conditions in GCC countries differ dramatically from North African and Middle Eastern realities, analogic thinking, a sense of commonality and the borrowing of mobilizations frames, repertoires and modes of contention, made the outburst of unrest in the Gulf region possible, particularly in the least oil-rich GCC countries of Oman and Bahrain.<sup>4</sup> In these countries the impact of such factors was compounded by the crucial importance of shared culture, history and identity across the whole Arab world.

On 16 February 2011, tens of thousands of people gathered in Pearl Roundabout in the heart of the capital city of Bahrain, Manama, to call for democracy, while the world's cameras were turned on Cairo and Tunis. During the night Bahraini forces moved into the camp to evict sleeping protestors by using force. On that same night the GCC had an emergency meeting during which it pledged to support the Khalifa ruling family. Protests continued in the following weeks and months reaching a death-toll of more than 45 people. Up to 1,500 people were arrested and several thousand more fired from their jobs since February.<sup>5</sup> In Oman, unrest erupted after hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets in the northern port city of Sohar demanding jobs and an end to corruption. Sultan Qaboos swiftly responded by firing 12 cabinet ministers and raising government salaries while agreeing to boost unemployment benefits and minimum wages by 40 percent. These measures brought calm back to the country.

Beyond the drivers and the rationale of the popular mobilization that has invested the Gulf region, our attention will focus here on the GCC countries' responses that are likely to assist or hinder the long-term process of change in the region.<sup>6</sup> The GCC countries have reacted to the "Arab Spring" through a mix of economic handouts, political and economic reforms, military intervention, outreach to and support for the protestors. When mapping such a confused ensemble of responses displayed in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria, the concept that immediately comes to mind is that of "double standard". Given the absence of other theoretically relevant concepts to account for the variation observed, the notion of double standard will be used as an analytical and explanatory tool here, bereft of the necessarily negative judgment often implied by the use of this term.

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<sup>3</sup> On the first two concepts, see Silvia Colombo, "The Southern Mediterranean: Between Changes and Challenges to its Sustainability", in *MedPro Technical Papers*, No. 1 (November 2010), <http://www.medpro-foresight.eu/publication/southern-mediterranean-between-changes-and-challenges-its-sustainability>, on the others, see David S. Patel, Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Fizzles and Fireworks: A Comparative Perspective on the Diffusion of Popular Protests in the Middle East and North Africa*, Paper presented at the 2nd annual POMEPS conference "The Arab Uprisings in Comparative Perspective", Washington, 20-21 May 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of the Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions", in *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June 2007), p. 259-276, <http://www.princeton.edu/~mbeissin/beissinger.modrev.article.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Kristian Ulrichsen, "Bahrain's Uncertain Future", in *The Middle East Channel*, 23 November 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/23/bahrain\\_s\\_uncertain\\_future](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/23/bahrain_s_uncertain_future); "Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 December 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of clarity we are stressing here the need to decouple the process of authoritarian breakdown from the process of transitioning out of authoritarianism and replacing it with democracy.

## 2. Explaining the GCC's responses to the "Arab Spring"

The concept of "double-standard" refers to the striking dissimilarities in the way in which the GCC countries have reacted to situations that, in spite of some important differences across the region, on the whole called into question the existing status quo and embodied the struggle against the lack of freedom and opportunities for large sectors of society, particularly the youth. What follows is an attempt to explain the GCC's double standard in light of the "Arab Spring" by resorting to three main dichotomies that are ingrained in the way the GCC countries themselves frame the world and their role in it. These dichotomies are related to the spatial and political dimension - inside vs. outside -, to the nature of the regime - monarchies vs. republics - and to religious identities - Sunnis vs. Shiites.

### 2.1. Inside vs. outside the GCC

The inside vs. outside dichotomy reflects the geographical separation of the GCC countries as a well-defined, but so far only loosely integrated, sub-regional reality from the rest of the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> Since its formation in May 1981, the GCC has acted as an organization constituted chiefly to help shaikhly regimes maintain their grip on power through security and economic means.<sup>8</sup> This objective has been mainly achieved by excluding other entities, be they would-be regional powers such as Iraq and, even more so, Iran, or poor and unstable neighbours such as Yemen.<sup>9</sup> The inside vs. outside dimension is thus a fundamental element to understand the double standard-driven logic of the GCC response to the "Arab Spring".

From the "inside" angle, the "Arab Spring" has been considered by the regimes of the Gulf states as a threat to their stability, if not survival, which has consequently warranted a determined coercive response. Prioritizing the internal status quo over abrupt change or gradual democratic reform has always been business as usual for regimes that are among the most conservative in the world. It is thus not surprising that, faced with unprecedented challenges from their own populations, the GCC ruling monarchies have chosen to step up their conservative approach. The GCC's counter-revolutionary strategy has had two prongs. On the one hand, the GCC countries have deployed lavish financial inducements to key sectors of society and engaged in limited political and economic reforms. On the other hand, they have carried out harsh repression of the revolts and even military intervention to ensure regime survival.

State patronage has been heavily employed by all GCC countries, but most generously by those states where potential destabilization has been highest, i.e., Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain. With a total estimated volume of USD 130 billion, the welfare

<sup>7</sup> A number of analyses show that so far the GCC has achieved only limited cooperation. Such cooperation has been mainly driven by the issue of regime survival, an issue in which all six ruling families share an overriding interest. Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf. Diplomacy, Security and Economy Coordination in a Changing Middle East*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2011, p. 1-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113-130; Stephanie Cronin and Nur Masalha, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC States: Revolution to Realpolitik?", in *LSE Kuwait Programme Research Papers*, No. 17 (August 2011), <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/government/research/resgroups/kuwait/research/papers/iran.aspx>.

package announced by Saudi Arabia in May 2011 is larger than the country's total annual budget in 2007.<sup>10</sup> The package includes huge investments in the public sector through job creation and pay rises. In addition, 60,000 new jobs have been created in the Ministry of Interior, which already employs as many Saudis as the whole country's private sector. On the top of that, 500,000 new houses have been built. Finally, the minimum public sector wage has been increased to a level three times higher than the average private sector wage.

Such massive expenditures by the state raise a serious question about the long-term sustainability of the whole welfare package. This problem is only to be augmented by the combination of sustained demographic growth, high levels of youth unemployment, and a widening gap between the rich and poor, all factors that are likely to result in growing demand for state benefits. Moreover, an excessively swollen public sector does little to induce the Saudi youth to pursue higher education or job opportunities in the private sector.<sup>11</sup>

State patronage has paired up with the introduction of limited political reforms. In September 2011, the Saudi government announced that women would be allowed to vote and run in municipal elections as well as join the all-appointed *Shura* (consultative) Council. However, it remains uncertain whether these measures - in themselves amounting to limited political liberalization - will actually be implemented, given the opposition of conservative clerics and senior members of the ruling family, including the newly-appointed crown prince, Prince Nayef bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud, who is regarded as one of the most anti-reformist figures among the ageing sons of the kingdom's founder Abdul-Aziz Ibn Saud.<sup>12</sup>

In the attempt to placate domestic political unrest, Bahrain and Oman have also reviewed their fiscal policies with a view to quelling the mobilization of opposition forces. These measures have basically consisted in expanded entitlement programmes, new public sector jobs and greater subsidies. The government of Bahrain has gone as far as to promise 20,000 new jobs in its Ministry of Interior, a huge number relative to the total national population of less than 300,000 people.<sup>13</sup> Far from reducing the dependency of GCC nationals on public spending and increasing their participation in the private sector, arguably a *sine qua non* to ensure social and economic

<sup>10</sup> Steffen Hertog, "The Cost of the Counter Revolution in the GCC", in *The Middle East Channel*, 31 May 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/31/the\\_costs\\_of\\_counter\\_revolution\\_in\\_the\\_gcc](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/31/the_costs_of_counter_revolution_in_the_gcc).

<sup>11</sup> Saudi Arabia's national population has grown from 9 million to over 20 million people in the last thirty years. Future projections say that Saudi population will double over the next twenty years. If we compare this situation with that of Saudi Arabia's tiny neighbour, Qatar, whose national population barely reaches 300,000 today and which has equally announced a welfare package worth over USD 8 billion, it appears that Qatar's equivalent per capita spending is approximately four times higher than Saudi Arabia's. This corroborates the view that Saudi welfare spending may not be able to adequately solve the increasing socio-economic problems that the country is facing. Population figures are taken from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)'s website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/about/main.asp> (accessed February 11, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> "Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah gives women right to vote, run in municipal elections", in *Al Arabiya News*, 25 September 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/25/168602.html>; Jane Kinninmont, "Keeping it in the Family", in *The Middle East Channel*, 3 November 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/03/keeping\\_it\\_in\\_the\\_family\\_for\\_saudi\\_succession](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/03/keeping_it_in_the_family_for_saudi_succession).

<sup>13</sup> Steffen Hertog, "The Cost of the Counter Revolution in the GCC", cit.

sustainable development, the regimes have been moving in opposite directions. Interestingly enough, these two countries have also been the object of a combined USD 20 million aid package from the other GCC countries, a significant proportion of which will most likely be coughed up by Saudi Arabia.

The meddling in the internal affairs of other GCC countries for the sake of regime survival and regional stability has gone a step further in the case of Bahrain. In March 2011, soldiers from Saudi Arabia and police forces from the UAE entered the country to protect the ruling Al Khalifa family, which follows the Sunni version of Islam, against a pro-democracy movement mostly made up of the disgruntled Shia majority. The move was officially presented as an act in defence of a GCC member against “external threats”, meaning Iran. After years of stressing the purely symbolic nature of the GCC’s joint Peninsula Shield Force - the military arm of the GCC composed of about 40,00 troops - also with a view not to provoke Iran, its deployment on 14 March 2011 during the Bahraini crisis attests to the fact that preoccupations of a snowballing effect from Bahrain into other GCC members has reached considerable heights.<sup>14</sup> This was indeed the first GCC deployment in relation to an internal threat.

The GCC’s heavy hand against protestors in Bahrain is in strident contrast with its approach to other forms of unrest taking place outside the Gulf region, particularly in Libya and Syria. In both cases, the tiny sheikdom of Qatar has stood out for being extremely active in supporting the anti-regime revolts. The “Arab Spring” context has enabled Qatar - one of the richest countries in the world in per capita terms - to emerge not only as the champion of Arab public opinion, but also as a key international player vying for the role of the indispensable interlocutor between the (Sunni) Arab world and the West. Qatar’s international posture has undergone a major shift from its preferred role of political broker in an unstable region - for example in Lebanon, Israel-Palestine, Western Sahara and Afghanistan - to the enthusiastic partner in the NATO-led mission that intervened in Libya in support of the anti-Qaddafi rebels.<sup>15</sup> Qatar was the first Arab country to recognize the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC). Qatar crucially supplied the rebels with financial aid, gas and weapons. In an unprecedented move signalling a qualitative change in Qatar’s foreign policy based on soft power and financial prowess, special forces from the Gulf kingdom were seen on the front lines during the final assault on Qaddafi’s compound on 24 August 2011.<sup>16</sup> Lying far away from the Gulf shores, the Libyan civil war was the perfect opportunity for Qatar to gain credit as the champion in the battle for freedom, dignity and social justice raging between entrenched authoritarian regimes and more or less organized opposition forces. To this end, Qatar skilfully exploited Al Jazeera, the satellite broadcast based in Doha, to rally the Arab public opinion in favour of the foreign intervention in Libya and of its own role as a key Arab player, a role commensurate to its wealth and clout. Al Jazeera has effectively exploited its role as opinion maker all over the Arab and Islamic world in the case of Libya, as it did a few months later with Syria. In the wake of

<sup>14</sup> Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Eckart Woertz, “Qatar and Europe’s Neglect of the Gulf Region”, in *Notes Internacionales CIDOB*, No. 46 (February 2012), [http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/notes\\_internacionales/n1\\_46/qatar\\_and\\_europe\\_s\\_neglect\\_of\\_the\\_gulf\\_region](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/notes_internacionales/n1_46/qatar_and_europe_s_neglect_of_the_gulf_region).

<sup>16</sup> David Roberts, Behind Qatar’s Intervention in Libya, in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 28 September 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68302/david-roberts/behind-qatars-intervention-in-libya>.

Qaddafi's downfall, Qatar is very well positioned to reap the fruits even in the currently precarious Libyan domestic situation. The sheikdom has built up direct channels of communication with (and influence over) both Islamist and secular political and civil society forces. Observers also suspect that Qatar might hope for preferred access to Libyan energy deals and improved access to European gas markets.<sup>17</sup>

International circumstances and interests are not aligned for Qatar to push for an external intervention in the Syrian civil war. Nonetheless, the inability of the UN Security Council - blocked by an apparently unbridgeable gap between Western powers, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other - to forge any form of concerted international response to the crisis has given Qatar the chance to occupy centre-stage also here. Interestingly, so far Qatar has mainly worked towards reinvigorating the role of the Arab League, which it sees as a useful sounding-board to frame the debate on the Libyan and Syrian crises according to its own preferences. As has been the case in Libya, Qatar is likely to opt for a more incisive role in Syria if convergence is reached at the broader international level.

Against this backdrop, the fact that Qatar was the first Arab country to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus in July 2011 and in January 2012 Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani even contemplated the intervention of Arab troops to hasten Assad's removal could be interpreted as clear signals to the international community regarding Qatar's preferred course of action. Qatar's emergence as an increasingly assertive Arab power has placed it in direct competition with Saudi Arabia, with which it has had a long-standing rocky relationship. Both countries are bidding for greater regional influence and, generally speaking, smaller Gulf countries like Qatar are concerned "about a too tight embrace of the GCC heavy weight Saudi Arabia, which in turn is anxious to assert influence over its junior partners".<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the competition between the two GCC members, Saudi Arabia has increasingly converged on the Qatari position on Syria, moving from a more conservative stance during the first phase of the "Arab Spring" to a more revisionist approach. In August 2011, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador to Syria and pushed for an end of the Arab League's observation mission in January 2012.

In conclusion, the choice of the GCC to follow opposite paths in confronting the "Arab Spring" challenge - counter-revolutionary inside the Gulf area and pro-revolutionary outside of it - seems the result of contradicting priorities. In fact, GCC action both inside and outside its borders has been driven by the same logic: to manage instability by shoring up friendly regimes on the inside and expanding its clout outside. Even what may appear as diverging domestic and foreign policy strategies by the two most powerful members of the GCC, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, boils down to the inside vs. outside dichotomy upon closer inspection. As aptly stressed by Rime Allaf, "while Riyadh took the overt lead during the Yemeni and Bahraini uprisings, keeping them within the Gulf Co-operation Council, it was happy to leave Qatar to play the primary role in the Syrian revolution and in pushing the case to the Arab League".<sup>19</sup> This

<sup>17</sup> Eckart Woertz, "Qatar and Europe's Neglect of the Gulf Region", cit., p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Rime Allaf, "Qatar's Influence Increases in the Middle East", in *Guardian.co.uk*, 15 December 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/15/qatar-influence-middle-east>.



apparent division of labour between Saudi Arabia and Qatar - whereby the former is the guardian of the status quo inside the GCC, while the latter cultivates its role as the champion of Arab public opinion with a view to increasing its projected influence - is functional to the attainment of the common goal of managing instability internally and externally. Put simply, emphasizing different foreign policy paths between the two members to explain the two most significant military interventions by GCC countries in 2011 - in Bahrain and Libya - obscures more than it reveals.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2. Monarchies vs. republics

The strictly geographical “inside-outside” dichotomy does not suffice to fully explain the GCC’s double standard policy towards the “Arab Spring”. Divisions between the internal and the external space intersect with other dichotomies which lack geographical coherence. Indeed a second relevant dichotomy underpinning the GCC’s response to the “Arab Spring” is that between monarchies and republics.

This dichotomy is pivotal to understanding the differentiated attitude adopted by the GCC countries *vis-à-vis* Morocco and Jordan, on the one hand, and Yemen, on the other. The former two countries have experienced some domestic unrest that, however, has not jeopardized the stability of the ruling monarchies. By contrast, Yemen has been the theatre of a prolonged conflict between the regime of Abdallah Saleh and opposition forces. Out of concern that the situation could escalate into civil war and spiral out of control, the GCC countries have sought to find a way out of the crisis. Their effort has apparently been successful, as in November 2011 a Saudi-brokered deal was signed that paved the way for Saleh’s resignation (in return for an immunity guarantee).

The GCC countries, and in particular Saudi Arabia, have mostly looked at Yemen through the lenses of counter-terrorism, as the country is a haven to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), perhaps the most threatening of all of Al Qaeda’s regional offspring. The GCC countries have consequently cultivated their relationship with Yemen, even directly supporting the Saleh regime against the Houthi rebellion that has been ongoing since 2004. In return, they received Saleh’s cooperation in tackling the terrorist threat. As Saleh has been confronted with the arguably more pressing urgency of ensuring his regime’s survival, however, he has been increasingly viewed by the GCC as unable to deliver on counter-terrorism. In fact, his desperate attempt at clinging to power in the face of massive protests ultimately made him a liability for Riyadh and other Gulf capitals. In turn, the GCC countries opted for hastening Saleh’s departure from power, while trying to carve out a role for themselves that would enable them to influence Yemen’s future trajectory.

The GCC countries, and in particular Saudi Arabia, are not keen on seeing independent civic movements - mainly composed by the youth - take power in Yemen, as they fear a spill-over effect into their own territories. Accordingly, the Saudi-brokered deal does not meet the demands of the vast majority of those who took to the streets and died in Yemen calling for the complete removal of an endemically corrupt system.

<sup>20</sup> Jessica Forsythe, “Buffeted by the Winds of Change”, in *The World Today*, Vol. 67, No. 10 (November 2011), p. 17-19, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/TWT1111p17Saudi.pdf>.

Instead, it allows the GCC countries to show some support for the pro-democracy movement and at the same time isolate a despised ruler, while maintaining the old system of power that serves the interests of regional stability. This moderately transformative approach has not been followed through consistently however. In the case of Arab monarchies - namely Morocco and Jordan - the GCC has demonstrated an attachment not merely to the broad system of power but to the rulers themselves.

The fact that Yemen is a republic rather than a monarchy helps explain why, when push came to shove, the GCC was ready to let President Saleh go, for the sake of regional stability. By contrast, the far stronger support for monarchies facing domestic turmoil can be read as an attempt by the GCC at defending not merely the monarchs in power but also their monarchical system of rule. At the same time, the GCC's "rally-around-the-flag" *vis-à-vis* Arab monarchies extends its protection and influence over Morocco and Jordan.

This interpretation is reinforced by the GCC's unprecedented attempt to forge a new identity based not so much on geographical proximity as on political affinity. Rather than a regional organization, the GCC should be seen as a "club of monarchies". The rationale of this shift is simple: the GCC countries, concerned about the potentially disruptive consequences of the "Arab Spring", are betting on the fact that, as the old adage goes, "strength is in numbers". By reaching out to the regimes of Jordan and Morocco in a period of turmoil with a pledge of financial aid, and by inviting them to join their exclusive club, the GCC countries have attempted to shore up further their own stability. By comparing the GCC's different treatment of Jordan and Morocco, on the one hand, and Yemen, on the other, - without forgetting that Yemen has been seeking membership of the GCC for years with no success - the monarchies vs. republics dichotomy stands out as a relevant explanatory factor underpinning the GCC's response to the "Arab Spring". All in all, the GCC countries have attempted to demonstrate that the "Arab Spring" is a malaise of the Arab republics rather than the monarchies. This line of reasoning aims at increasing the distance between monarchies and republics in the Arab world as a result of the events triggered by the "Arab Spring", by artificially singling the latter as fertile ground for protests and regime capitulation.

### 2.3. *Sunnis vs. Shiites*

Seeking a path to emerge unscathed by the "Arab Spring" has also led the GCC countries to play the card of sectarianism. Being an exclusive "club of monarchies" harbouring a Sunni, rather puritan form of Islam, it comes as no surprise that the GCC countries have attempted to prop up Sunni forces across the region. GCC support has gone both to authoritarian Sunni regimes threatened by a Shiite opposition representing the majority of the population (e.g., the case of Bahrain) and to Sunni anti-authoritarian movements battling non-Sunni regimes, as is the case in Syria, where the ruling Assad family belongs to an heterodox branch of Shiism, the Alawites.

The Sunni-Shiite divide is probably the oldest and most important schism in the history of Islam. However, insofar as such dichotomy is used to understand better the rationale of the GCC's response to the "Arab Spring", it is necessary to recall its underlying geopolitical undercurrents. In the Gulf context, the Sunni vs. Shiite dichotomy is also a

critical factor defining the rivalry between the mostly Sunni Arab GCC countries and the mostly Persian Shiite Iran. The relationship between the GCC and Iran has never been easy. As recalled above, the birth of the GCC in the early 1980s was to some extent the direct response to the new geopolitical situation created by the establishment of a revolutionary Shiite regime in Iran. Sectarian interests have thus been at the core of the GCC project since its onset.

Always fearful of Iran's regional ascendancy, GCC countries have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the Islamic Republic's outreach and influence after the US's toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Iran's apparent pursuit of a nuclear weapon capability has only added to these anxieties. On top of that, all GCC countries have to deal with the real or potential radicalization of their Shiite communities. In Oman, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait, these communities are relatively well-integrated into the socio-political fabric and share the general economic prosperity enjoyed by the rest of the population. As such, they pose no direct danger to the ruling regime. But in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shiite communities are politically, economically and socially marginalized and they are often portrayed by the government as a threat to social cohesion and national stability. The numerical strength of these communities, representing in the case of Bahrain around 70 percent of the population, as well as their concentration in strategic areas and industries, such as the oil-rich eastern province of Hasa in Saudi Arabia (where they represent between 40 percent to 60 percent of the workforce in the oil industry), are not taken lightly by the ruling regimes.<sup>21</sup> Rightly or wrongly, they see Shiite demands to end their marginalization and exclusion as the harbinger of increasing Iranian influence in their countries.<sup>22</sup>

These potentially explosive conditions have not prevented GCC countries from developing an ambiguous relationship with Iran. As argued by Cronin and Masalha, this has taken place mainly at the bilateral level. Unable to formulate a collective approach to Iran within the GCC, individual Gulf states have sometimes opted for seeking a manageable relationship with Tehran on their own.<sup>23</sup> The most enterprising of them have even found a way to profit from Iran's relative international isolation. The UAE, for instance, has become the main exporter to Iran as well as the largest re-exporter of Iranian goods (including to the United States). These partly cooperative links between Iran and individual GCC states has not, however, gone beyond ad hoc pragmatic arrangements. Lacking a shared understanding of the region's strategic outlook, latent tensions between the GCC and Iran have persisted.

The "Arab Spring" has exacerbated such tensions. Iran has been seen as potentially expanding its influence, for example in Egypt where the fall of pro-US President Hosni Mubarak has been followed by an improvement in relations with Tehran. The crossing of the Suez Canal by two Iranian warships heading for Syria as early as February 2011 - something unheard of in the previous decades - was interpreted as a bad omen for times to come on the Arab shores of the Gulf.

<sup>21</sup> Stephanie Cronin and Nur Masalha, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC States ...", cit., p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Kristian Ulrichsen, "Gulf Security: Changing Internal and External Dynamics", in *LSE Kuwait Programme Research Papers*, May 2009, <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/government/research/resgroups/kuwait/research/papers/security.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Cronin and Nur Masalha, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC States ...", cit., p. 5-6.

Both in concrete and rhetorical terms, the new struggle for influence in the post-"Arab Spring" Middle East has been couched in an aggressive sectarian discourse. The notion of a destabilizing "Shia crescent" - a term referring to Iran, the ascending Shiite parties in Iraq, the Alawite regime in Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah that was first coined by Jordan's King Abdullah II<sup>24</sup> - has found new meaning. For instance, GCC leaders have used it to justify the intervention in Bahrain, as well as their support for the opposition in Syria. They have accused the protestors in Bahrain - largely but not exclusively coming from the economically disadvantaged Shiite community - of serving Iranian interests, and the latter of fomenting or otherwise encouraging the protests.<sup>25</sup> The GCC has applied the same, albeit reverse, logic to Syria: an Alawite regime (as recalled above, the Alawites are an heterodox Shiite minority) repressing a pro-democracy Sunni rebellion. Hence in Syria, contrary to the Bahrain case, the GCC has not hesitated to denounce strongly the atrocities committed by the regime and has actively supported the "Syrian revolution" with a view to snatching the opportunity to turn Syria away from its current orientation towards Iran.

The Sunni vs. Shiite dichotomy is particularly sensitive for Saudi Arabia. The Saudi monarchy has historically drawn legitimacy from religion, as the government ruling over the cradle of Islam, the cities of Mecca and Medina.<sup>26</sup> The emergence of a credible challenge to the Saudi monarchy's self-appointed role of keeper of Islam's holiest places is potentially the greatest danger to its authority. A preference for the status quo was a distinctive mark of Saudi Arabia's pre-2011 foreign policy. This helps explain Riyadh's initial backing of Mubarak in Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the former Tunisian president forced out of power in January 2011. However, once luck turned its back to Egypt's and Tunisia's autocrats, the Saudis adapted, spotting a chance to shape future developments. Along with other GCC partners, Saudi Arabia is now supporting certain political forces, e.g., the Islamists that have gained power in Tunisia and in Egypt, with a view to maintaining a favourable sectarian balance. In this game, Saudi Arabia seems to be playing in favour of a more conservative kind of Islamism, embodied by the Salafists, while Qatar seems more inclined to lean towards moderate Islamists as its preferred interlocutors, and to a certain extent clients, in the region.

### 3. The GCC's double standard: the challenges ahead

The three dichotomies illustrated above - inside vs. outside, monarchies vs. republics and Sunnis vs. Shiites - shed light on the complexity of the GCC's responses to the "Arab Spring". What does the double standard that emerges imply for future developments in the MENA region? Moving from the micro level to the macro level, three broad points emerge from this analysis.

First, the GCC's policy towards the Arab uprisings reflects a certain degree of convergence among the Gulf states, but has also laid bare significant differences, in

<sup>24</sup> Marc Lynch, "The What Cooperation Council?", in *Foreign Policy Marc Lynch Blog*, 11 March 2011, [http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/11/the\\_what\\_cooperation\\_council](http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/11/the_what_cooperation_council).

<sup>25</sup> "Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark", cit.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia. Power, Legitimacy and Survival*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2006.

particular between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Saudi Arabia has adopted a more conservative approach, whereas Qatar has displayed a more progressive attitude, particularly in Libya and Syria. These differences are predominantly linked to the political culture and the approach, more than to the content of the GCC's response to the "Arab Spring". Saudi Arabia and Qatar, like other GCC countries, share the short-term objective of moving the "Arab Spring" along a pattern which might expand, rather than jeopardize, their regional influence. So far cooperation has prevailed over competition, but it is not possible to discount the possibility of simmering political tensions and confrontation between Riyadh and Doha. Gulf leaders, at least some of them, are aware of this potential evolution, and are wary of the risk it entails. Talks of a possible upgrade of the Gulf Cooperation Council into a Gulf Union have their roots in these strategic considerations.

Second, the massive resort to state patronage to defuse domestic demands for greater political participation cannot last forever. If there is something that the "Arab Spring" has made clear is that the old ways of buying the silence of the opposition through patronage and corruption might not work forever. This does not mean that the GCC countries will be unable to contain political challenges at home in the short-to-medium term. It means that state patronage entails a serious risk of backlash: inasmuch as it expands entitlements, it raises public expectations to levels potentially unsustainable for the state. Countries such as Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia could face a self-created existential threat in the years ahead. The huge domestic social spending pledged since the start of the "Arab Spring", amounting to 12.8 percent of the GCC's total GDP for 2011, will contribute to inflationary pressure. A clearer strategy for growth and investment as well as a sustainable social contract between Gulf states and their citizens are needed.<sup>27</sup>

A final conclusion concerns the merits of the GCC's double standard policy and its future implications for the Gulf states and, indirectly, for Western powers. The measures that have been concocted by the GCC in their own space and in particular in Bahrain are in stark contrast with the "Arab Spring"'s pro-democracy flavour. Western democracies have not objected to this stance though. The prompt repression of the Bahraini revolt and the GCC's activism on other "Arab Spring" fronts such as Libya and Syria has freed the West from the incumbency to have to intervene in the Gulf, jeopardizing its well established relations with the Gulf regimes. Democracy promotion talk notwithstanding, the West is concerned that greater political representation in the Gulf might jeopardize the West's interests and agenda in the region. In a longer term perspective, however, the Western preference for Gulf stability amidst the winds of change across the Arab world may prove unwise. If indeed the Gulf regimes incur the problems sketched above and lose their grip on power, the West would again find itself on the wrong side of history and lose much of its influence in the region. To date, the greatest failure of the "Arab Spring" is Bahrain. Looking ahead, the future of the Arab world may hinge on this island whose prospects today are bleak and whose small size conceals its importance to broader regional and global balances.

*Updated: 26 March 2012*

<sup>27</sup> Ibrahim Saif, Rand Fakhoury, "Lessons from the Gulf's Twin Shocks", in *International Economic Bulletin*, 16 February 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/ieb/2012/02/16/lessons-from-gulf-s-twin-shocks/9omu>.

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#### **Istituto Affari Internazionali**

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 00186 Roma  
Tel.: +39/06/3224360 Fax: + 39/06/3224363  
E-mail: [iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it) - website: <http://www.iai.it>  
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