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## **EU-GCC Cooperation: Securing the Transition in Yemen**

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## EU-GCC Cooperation: Securing the Transition in Yemen

Edward Burke\*

The protests of the Arab Spring rose to a crescendo in Yemen in March 2011. On March 18, the Yemeni security forces opened fire on protestors in the country's capital, Sanaa, killing 52. Key military commanders including Major-General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar defected to the opposition. Other commanders took a more ambivalent approach – siding neither with the government nor the protestors. President Ali Abdullah Saleh began to look for an urgent and, if possible, honorable exit from power. In April 2011, he turned to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The GCC has rightly been praised for its remarkable achievement in creating and maintaining a customs union and encouraging advanced economic, educational, and cultural cooperation between its six member states. But it is not known for its coherence in foreign policy. In the case of Yemen, there had been major disagreements between Doha and Riyadh during 2007 and 2008 over the best approach towards resolving Yemen's escalating internal conflict between the government and Zaydi Shia rebels led by the Houthi clan in the northern province of Saada (which borders Saudi Arabia).<sup>1</sup> Qatar's ties to the Houthi rebels fed Saudi suspicion that

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1. Zaydi Shiism is a distinctive form of Islam that should not be confused with Twelver Shiism that is practised in Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East. The Zaydis follow the teachings of Zayd bin Ali and the first four Imams, beginning with Ali, and traditionally have looked to a living Imam for leadership, who must be a descendant of the Prophet (sayyid). The leader of the rebellion in Saada, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, qualifies for such a distinction. See the International Crisis Group Report, "Defusing the Saada Time-bomb," May 2009.

its smaller neighbor was once again over-reaching itself in a country where Saudi influence normally took precedence.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of foreign policy coherence combined with the relative size and institutional weakness/experience of the GCC Secretariat in dealing with foreign policy matters (the GCC has never mediated previously in a conflict) led some to question whether the GCC would be able to stem a rapidly escalating conflict in the most unstable and impoverished country in the Arabian Peninsula. Meanwhile, the European Union had staked much on 'region to region' political cooperation, working with the GCC Secretariat on areas of mutual interest, but had little to show for it. Some, including this author, called for a watering down of the region-to-region approach in favor of more bilateral EU political cooperation with individual GCC member state capitals (Burke, Echague, & Youngs, 2010).

More than two years on, the GCC has fared very well in responding to the initial challenges of the Yemen crisis. The GCC Initiative, originally presented in April 2011 and eventually signed by a recalcitrant President Saleh in November of that year, saw Saleh step down from power (although he remains politically active), the appointment of his deputy Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi as a caretaker President committed to reforming the military, tackling corruption, addressing regional grievances, constitutional review and new parliamentary elections. The Initiative bought some badly needed, if limited, time to address Yemen's myriad political, security and economic problems. Crucially, the GCC Initiative averted full-scale civil war in Yemen, which looked very likely in early 2011. However, serious tensions remain – the GCC Initiative is still regarded with suspicion by many in Yemen, not least the youth movements and in the south of the country. Many are particularly aggrieved at the immunity offered to leading members of the regime, including former President Saleh who continues to act as a political force within the country.

Despite the remaining challenges towards fully implementing the GCC Initiative, the EU owes the Gulf countries, and particularly the GCC Secretary-General, much thanks for helping to defuse a potentially much more serious conflict in 2011 and 2012. The GCC was aided by a number of factors: i) the strong influence its member states, most notably Saudi Arabia but also Oman, Qatar and the UAE, enjoy over key Yemeni political actors and movements; ii) the economic largesse the GCC was able to promise in order to mobilize support for a transition agreement; iii) a shift of thinking in Riyadh that allowed for a realignment of Saudi policy towards Yemen; iv) a coalition of moderates from both the Saleh-supporting

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2. Another aspect of Qatari foreign policy that alarms Riyadh is Doha's strong working ties with Lebanese Hizbollah.

General People's Congress (GPC) and the opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP),<sup>3</sup> who were determined to prevent further bloodshed; v) support from the EU, US and the UN at critical junctures – including the contributions of senior diplomats. This paper will limit its focus to the GCC in Yemen, its efforts to stabilize the country, and its partnership with the EU.

### The Right People for a Tough Job

Critical to the early success of the GCC intervention in Yemen's crisis was the human factor – the quality of diplomatic personnel who led negotiations. GCC Secretary-General Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani showed a sustained interest in Yemeni affairs, which had previously been lacking. In turn, Al-Zayani was able to rely upon the support of a capable UN diplomat Jamal Benomar who was appointed by the UN Secretary General in April 2011 as his Special Adviser on Yemen. He was also helped by the efforts of Michele Cervone d'Urso in 2011 until his replacement by Bettina Muscheidt as Head of the EU Delegation in Sanaa in mid-2012. The role of Mr. Cervone was critical towards marshaling a coherent EU response to the crisis, aided by key member-state ambassadors such as those from the UK, Germany and France who enabled the timely formulation of a coherent EU response to the events of the crisis. But the GCC Initiative would never have got off the ground without Abdul Karim Al-Eryani, Yemen's former Prime Minister, who recognized early on in the crisis that Yemen required urgent political reform. His long experience, pragmatism, and phlegmatic negotiating style were invaluable to the GCC, the EU, and the rest of the international community.

### Ten Years of Crisis

The Arab Spring protests of early January 2011 were not the spark for protests and violence in Yemen. The country had been in the grip of serious unrest for almost a decade. In the south, a powerful but loose coalition of former Marxists associated with the southern regime, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)<sup>4</sup> and groups of unemployed young people, including some with Islamist ties, were waging a low-level insurgency against the government in Sanaa, which most southerners

3. The Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) was established in 2005 to represent the interests of several political movements in opposition to the government. The largest party in the JMP is the predominantly northern, tribal and Islamist Al-Islah. It also includes the southern, more secularist Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). Although always a loose coalition, since the fall of President Saleh the JMP has become increasingly fractured as its constituent parts take opposing views on Yemen's transition process.
4. The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen with its capital in Aden collapsed at the end of the Cold War.

believe discriminates against their interests following the victory of the armed forces of the former North of Yemen against the PDRY in the civil war of 1994 (Stracke & Haidar 2009).

Meanwhile, for almost ten years the Yemeni military had waged a campaign against rebels in the north-west of the country, centered around Saada province and led by the Zaydi Shia Houthi clan. The origins of this rebellion demonstrated the fragility of Sanaa's rule in many provinces. It also highlighted the resistance of more traditional Zaydi Shia adherents to perceived cultural erosion as a consequence of support by elements of the Yemeni government and military for Salafi or other conservative Sunni groups (International Crisis Group 2009). Yemen was also beginning to rival Pakistan as the country with the largest Al-Qaeda presence, the offshoot Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The country was already smoldering on the eve of the Arab Spring.

### The Fall of Saleh

Looked at from another perspective, the surprise in Yemen is not President Ali Abdullah Saleh's overthrow but his longevity as a ruler. Prior to his accession as President of north Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic - YAR) in a military coup in 1978, none of his predecessors had survived more than five years in office since the formation of the YAR in 1962. From 1962 to 1978, five presidents were deposed by coups and protest movements. That Saleh succeeded not only in staying in power for more than 30 years but also in unifying Yemen in the early 1990s is no mean achievement of realpolitik. Although Yemen is often characterized as a 'failed' or 'failing state,' the patronage system presided over by Saleh endured for almost two decades after reunification until his removal from office in 2011. He also oversaw steady progress in terms of increasing literacy and living standards during the early 1980s and 1990s, albeit from a very low base (World Bank 2009).

Although Yemen's political system is overtly republican, in the more populated north of the country the state's fragile legitimacy rests heavily upon religious and tribal structures. The current Republic was founded in 1990 as a result of the unification of the Northern Arab Republic of Yemen (YAR), in the aftermath the overthrow of the ruling Hamid al-Din dynasty in 1962, and the southern state, the Socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) which had been greatly weakened following years of internecine bloodletting and the collapse of its patron the USSR. In its early days, the YAR modelled itself upon the anti-colonial but secular model of Gamal Abd al-Nasser's Egypt, from which it drew much of its support.

The weakness of the south affected its bargaining position in the new unity government and led to its main party, Al-Hizb Al-Ishtiraki (Socialist Party, YSP), being effectively shut out of power following elections in 1993. These elections resoundingly confirmed the preeminent position of the North in the new state, despite previous power-sharing commitments. A brutal civil war followed in 1994, during which the government relied upon networks of recently returned jihadi fighters from Afghanistan to crush the southern rebels. The crushing of the southern resistance led to a period of effective military occupation of the south by the Yemeni army, which many southerners believe has never effectively ended. They accused senior military figures close to President Saleh of trying to run the local economy through the requisitioning of land and control of local industries (Burke 2012; Stracke & Haidar 2009).

Ultimately Saleh was brought down by a combination of a decline in oil revenues, corruption, rising food scarcity, and unemployment linked to a growing population (now at approximately 30 million). He also politically miscalculated, spurning opportunities to negotiate with the Houthi movement and refusing to integrate key PDRY officers into a unified military. Moreover, a system of patronage had been crucial to the longevity of the Saleh regime, but it also locked the country into a corrupt system which proved impossible to reform. Even his support in the north of the country began to ebb – rumors of coup attempts were widespread. The Republican Guards, under the control of the President's son, Ahmed Ali, took up positions in and around the capital in the years preceding the Arab Spring to preempt such an attack on the capital. But the attack would not only come from outside the capital. In Sanaa itself young Yemenis were increasingly outraged by a lack of economic opportunities and levels of regime corruption.

From 2008 to 2011, Riyadh wrung its hands when it came to Yemen – what to do? Saleh was clearly weakening, yet King Abdullah resisted the idea of trying to replace him. Worse, AQAP had launched a series of attacks against Saudi Arabian targets, including nearly assassinating the current Minister for the Interior (then Deputy Minister) and head of the Kingdom's counter-terrorism program Prince Mohammad bin Nayef in 2009. Later that year the Kingdom found itself fighting Houthi fighters who crossed the border causing over 100 Saudi troop fatalities. Something needed to be done.

### **GCC Relations (and Cooperation) with Yemen before 2011 - Strengths and Weaknesses**

A story told in Yemen is that, on his deathbed, the founder of Saudi Arabia, King



Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al-Saud, warned his sons that ‘the good or evil for us will come from Yemen.’ The story, even if apocryphal, does reveal how Yemenis believe Saudi Arabia views their country: more with suspicion than brotherly love. Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, the former Saudi Minister for Defense, who died in 2011, was the long-time holder of the ‘Yemen portfolio’ for the Saudi state. Sultan served as Minister for Defense for almost 50 years.

Sultan’s long memory and that of his family (his half-brother King Faisal had waged war against Yemen as a young prince in the 1930s forcing Sanaa to formally cede the provinces of Najran and Jazin to the Saudi state) meant that he regarded Saudi Arabia’s southern neighbor with a certain wariness or (some said) even dislike. Sultan built up impressive networks of client tribal leaders in Yemen, especially among the two strongest tribal confederations in north Yemen, the Bakhil and the Hashid (al-Okaz 2010). Sultan was known for his strong traditionalism – he supported attempts to re-instate the Zaydi Shia Imamate after it was deposed in the republican revolution of 1962. He overlooked religious differences because his dislike of a revolutionary republic supported by Iraq and Egypt was greater than his contempt for Yemen’s Shia dynasty (Gause 1990: 4).

### **A Saudi Policy Vacuum?**

Sultan’s absence from Riyadh for much of the last years of his life created a vacuum. The annual budget for the Ministry of Defense’s Special Office for Yemen Affairs was reduced from \$3.5 billion to less than half that amount. Some in Yemen regarded Sultan’s exit from the political scene as an opportunity for Riyadh and Sanaa to forge a better relationship, one which would strengthen the Yemeni state through more overt on-budget development projects as opposed to an excessive reliance on Saudi hand-outs to tribal leaders. But the relationship was characterized by neglect – there was an absence of leadership in Riyadh on what future Saudi-Yemeni ties should look like.

In 2009, Saudi diplomats complained privately that they did not know who was running the Yemen portfolio day to day. It certainly was not the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. A slow trend emerged in the years before 2011: Control over Saudi interests in Yemeni affairs, hitherto the preserve of the Ministry of Defense, began to be shared with the Ministry of the Interior and the Saudi intelligence services. King Abdullah wanted to normalize relations with Yemen. This was seen as a welcome change by many officials in Sanaa who were tired of Sultan’s use of tribal allies as proxies to influence Yemeni politics as he saw fit but the shift in emphasis away from the Ministry of Defense also created uncertainty over who was really now in charge.



A lack of clear policy direction on Yemen was to prove costly as Saudi Arabia found itself embroiled in a conflict with Yemeni rebels on its border (Hill & Nonneman 2011).

King Abdullah, both as Crown Prince and as King, has worked hard to improve relations with Yemen. Breaking the conservative mold of chilly, sometimes acrimonious Saudi-Yemeni relations has not been easy but Abdullah was the driving force behind the resolution of outstanding Yemeni-Saudi border issues in 2000. In 2009, the King was said to be angered by the behavior of the governor of the border province of Najran, Prince Mishal bin Saud al-Saud, who had settled extremist Yemeni tribesmen in his province as a means of intimidating local Ismailis (Human Rights Watch 2008). The King replaced Prince Mishal and succeeded in addressing a precarious situation by offering redress to the Ismailis for the wrongs suffered at the hands of the previous governor (al-Okaz 2009). However, this was only one part of the King's border problems. The cross-border conflict between Saudi troops and Yemeni Houthi tribesmen in 2009 was another wake-up call for Riyadh. In that year, Houthi tribesmen crossed into Saudi territory in response to alleged Saudi military assistance to the Yemeni authorities, killing approximately 110 Saudi troops and wounding hundreds more. The Saudi government and public were shocked - such high casualties were not expected.

Meanwhile, criticism of Saudi policy began to be heard from even the Kingdom's most important ally, the United States. In 2010, the US Senate Committee for Foreign Relations went so far as to blame Saudi misallocation of aid for 'a lack of transparency and enabling the perpetuation of poor governance.' Such complaints are said to have partially influenced King Abdullah's decision to rein in the activities of the Saudi Ministry of Defense, including its support of certain tribal allies in Yemen (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2010: 15). The King increasingly turned to Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who in 2012 became Minister for the Interior, and Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, the head of the country's intelligence services, to put some order to Saudi-Yemeni relations. Their reputation for efficiency and far-sightedness was to be tested in Yemen (Hill & Nonneman 2011: 4).

### **The Other GCC Countries - from Qatari Mediation to Kuwaiti Indifference**

Compared to the critical importance of Riyadh, the role of the other five GCC member states is more peripheral. But this is not to conclude that they do not matter. Border security, intelligence cooperation, development support – these are

areas of major importance and expertise for Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. However, Kuwait – for historical reasons related to Yemen’s refusal to condemn the invasion of that country by Iraq in 1990 – had been slow to re-engage with Yemen. This now appears to be changing: in 2013, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development announced a new plan of assistance to Yemen, including a \$30 million project to upgrade the Aden power grid (*Yemen Post* 2010). Bahrain’s size and domestic problems have also limited its engagement with Yemen – although former Bahraini Defense Forces senior officer and now GCC Secretary General, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, has made a major contribution to improving Yemen’s relations with the GCC of late.

The UAE Federal Government has consistently pledged large sums of development assistance to Yemen but has admitted to significant problems in disbursing such aid due to corruption and other absorption capacity problems. Nevertheless, its commitments are impressive: in 2009, Yemen was the single largest recipient of UAE official overseas aid – over \$772 million, to be spent across a range of sectors including education and water and electricity projects as well as funding government services, most of which are managed by the Abu Dhabi Fund for International Development.

Overall, among the GCC countries, the UAE has a relatively good record in delivering upon its aid commitments, including providing relief to victims of the Saada conflict and flooding and providing assistance to communities affected by Yemen’s political instability and the consequent downturn in the economy. The UAE was to emerge as a very helpful participant in the Sanaa transition dialogue in 2011. The Emirati Ambassador, Abdullah Matar Al-Mazroui, played an important role as an interlocutor between the EU and the GCC countries (Burke 2012).

Although Oman is an aid contributor to Yemen, it also competes with Yemen for a share of assistance from regional organizations. Despite seeking support for its own development, Oman nominally committed \$100 million for projects in Yemen but these funds have been exceptionally slow in terms of disbursement since this original undertaking was made at the London conference in 2006 (al-Oman 2010). Although Oman ostensibly supports Yemen’s accession to the GCC, Omani diplomats claim that this is a long way off. Muscat believes it is better to offer assistance to Yemen before it joins the GCC rather than after accession to avoid Yemen lagging behind other member states. Oman has also jointly completed the Shahn-al-Ghaida highway with Yemen, which has greatly enhanced opportunities for commercial relations between the two countries. In cooperation with Yemen, Oman is currently developing a far-sighted plan for the al-Mazunah Free Zone on

the border of the two countries. Oman has signed over 76 agreements on bilateral cooperation with Yemen, and officials in Sanaa have expressed their appreciation of Oman's efforts to keep Yemen on the GCC agenda.

Qatar has been the most proactive of the GCC countries in seeking to resolve Yemen's internal problems. During 2007 and 2008, Qatar pushed the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh to agree to a truce with the Houthi-led rebels in the north of the country, dispatching twelve officers from the Qatari military during 2007-2008 to lead mediation efforts in the north of the country in a process overseen by Qatar's most senior diplomats. The process was derailed on several occasions before a final effort in the summer of 2008 succeeded in brokering a ceasefire, which included a generous aid package and exile for the senior Houthi leadership in Doha. Although Qatari investment, including a \$500 million real estate development, was critical in securing leverage to mediate an eventual ceasefire, this was not enough to prevent President Saleh from breaking off contacts with the Houthi rebels and hostilities breaking out once more. Saleh's own personal contempt for the Houthi movement mirrored the desire of Saudi Arabia for a definitive military victory in order to secure its border with Yemen. Moreover, Riyadh was increasingly concerned that the Houthi movement could be used by Iran as a proxy with which to threaten the Kingdom.

Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani felt particularly irritated at what he regarded as deliberate Saudi obstruction of his mediation efforts. Saudi Arabia, like other Arab states, has long been concerned about Doha's ties with Tehran, lest Qatar advance an agenda favorable to Iranian interests in the region. The Qatari experience of mediation in Yemen in 2007 and 2008 offered a clear example of Qatari financial leverage being trumped by the influence of Saudi Arabia, with negative consequences for Yemen and the region.

Qatari attempts in 2010 for a renewed mediation role were overtaken by the events of the Arab Spring. Moreover, during 2010 and 2012, as was demonstrated in the US diplomatic cables released by 'Wikileaks,' President Saleh appeared to believe that Qatar was actively aiding his opponents (Wikileaks 2009; Burke 2012). In the aftermath of the protests that broke out in Yemen in early 2011, Qatar opted not to play a bilateral role or to push for a high-profile response by the Arab League. However, Qatar did play an important role in resisting any attempt to dilute the GCC plan to ease President Saleh from power, even temporarily withdrawing its support for the GCC mediation effort at a crucial juncture in May 2011 (MOFA 2011). Doha was concerned that some officials in Riyadh were considering trying to

keep the Saleh regime in place with only some slight modifications. Qatar believed that option was not viable – leading members of the regime including the president and his son had to go. Key interlocutors such as UN Special Adviser Jamal Benomar and Yemen's former Prime Minister Abdul-Karim al-Eryani concurred – without a meaningful shift in the power balance in Yemen, the crisis would simply escalate.

### **Aid – Many Promises, Less Delivery**

In terms of sheer size, GCC aid commitments dwarf those of the EU and the US. From 1990–2004 the Arab Fund, the Saudi Fund, the Islamic Development Bank, and the OPEC Fund provided over \$1 billion in aid to Yemen, compared to \$250 million by the EU over the same period. Arab and Islamic NGOs provided \$51 million for the same period (MOPIc 2010). At the 2006 London donors' conference co-convened by the GCC, Gulf donors pledged more than half of the total \$4.7 billion (\$2.5 billion) made by all international donors. Saudi Arabia was by far the largest bilateral donor, pledging over \$1.2 billion, followed by UAE (\$650 million) and Qatar (\$500 million) (MOPIc 2010).

Pledges can be deceptive. Most of the \$4.7 billion aid committed by international donors at the 2006 London donors' conference on Yemen was never disbursed. By early 2010, the Yemeni government reported that only 7 per cent of the GCC pledged aid from the 2006 London conference had been spent (MOPIc 2010). Instead the majority of disbursement came from non-GCC, OECD/DAC donors amounting to \$420 million while GCC disbursement was \$45 million – the other \$83 million came from regional and multilateral donor agencies and funds. Saudi Arabia disbursed \$33 million of its pledge of \$1.27 billion, Oman \$9.56 of \$100 million, Qatar \$2.2 of \$200 million, while the UAE and Kuwait did not disburse any of their respective \$650 million and \$200 million commitments. Meanwhile, of the regional institutions, the Islamic Development Bank disbursed \$11 million of its \$200 million pledge, the Arab Fund \$2.9 million of \$821 million, while the Arab Monetary Fund failed to distribute any part of its \$220 million commitment (MOPIc 2010).

However, the figures released by the Yemeni government do not reflect all GCC 'assistance.' They have been rejected by the GCC as a serious understatement of Gulf assistance. The confusion can be largely explained by the fact that the Yemeni report was based on an internationally accepted definition of aid, channelled through the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPI) and other official Yemeni development agencies. The GCC countries have distributed much more funds – but through informal channels or in the form of investments or loans. Yemen

also received additional emergency funding in response to the devastating floods that swept the country in 2009 – the Arab Fund for Development gave \$135 million, Saudi Arabia \$100 million and the UAE \$35 million. In response to the food crisis of 2008, the UAE alone leveraged a further \$50 million compared to \$27.3 million by the EC – these donations did not fall under the London conference commitments (MOPICc 2010). Nevertheless, it is generally accurate to conclude that the majority of the promises of aid from the GCC went unfulfilled. The fault is not the GCC's alone. Yemeni officials acknowledge that levels of corruption have got out of hand in recent years. GCC government officials were increasingly frustrated with how their money was being spent and were often unwilling to disburse funds on badly-managed projects.

### Revolution, Crisis, and the GCC-EU Response

The uprising began where revolutions in Yemen have always begun, in the northern city of Taiz – the country's former capital. Here and in Sanaa the regime watched as thousands of protestors assembled during January and February, leading eventually to violent confrontation in March and mass defections from the Army encouraged by some of the commanders. Who would take the initiative to prevent Yemen from sliding into an abyss? Many Yemeni parties did not trust Saudi Arabia – not least the Houthis and the Southern movement (Hiraak). Qatar was seen as too pro-opposition. The GCC Secretary-General was the proposed compromise – allowing both for control and studied distance as required by the GCC member states.

### Forging Bonds in a Crisis

What about GCC coordination with the rest of the international community, including the EU? Prior to the 2011 uprising, relations between the GCC embassies and the EU delegation and its member states had only recently improved. Until 2009, contact had been infrequent – some GCC ambassadors expressed their dislike of the clumsy demands for transparency demanded by Western diplomats in a system dominated by public largesse and patronage. They understood that some reforms were necessary but some diplomats of GCC member states regarded their European counterparts as being too rigid and lacking knowledge of the real political drivers behind Yemen. For their part, some European diplomats complained that the GCC embassies behaved in an opaque manner, handing out cash to tribes in a haphazard fashion and not channeling their aid through the MOPIC. The Friends of Yemen Initiative championed by the UK, Saudi Arabia, and the World Bank in 2010 was a welcome attempt to help bridge this gap in understanding and cooperation.

The response of the EU delegation, EU member state embassies, the GCC Secretariat, and the GCC embassies to the Yemeni crisis is all the more impressive considering this brittle political relationship in the past. Within weeks, the main planks of a transition plan had been laid after discussions between the GCC, other international actors, and key Yemeni interlocutors. The plan would be implemented in two phases. In the first phase, a government of national unity would be formed with an equal representation of GPC and Joint Meeting Parties (Opposition) seats. A liaison committee would also be formed to engage with the youth (who made up a large number of the protestors) and a military affairs committee would also be set up to oversee security and necessary reforms. An interpretation committee would be then set up to mediate in case of blockages in cabinet or elsewhere between the parties. Early presidential elections would be called and the terms of the agreement would temporarily supersede the constitution. In the second phase of the agreement, a national dialogue would take place aimed at working out the terms of a new constitution which would then be put to the people for ratification in an election. Finally, presidential and parliamentary elections would be held in 2014 after a new direction and constitution for the country was agreed upon.

After an initial wave of optimism that Saleh would resign, he appeared to change his mind. Several times in April and May of 2011, the GCC Secretary-General travelled to Sanaa to witness Saleh's signature of the agreement only for the event to be cancelled at the last moment. The EU and the GCC held their nerve under considerable pressure, looking for ways to pressure Saleh to resign. Saleh realized that his position was not as precarious as he initially feared. Far from the complete crumbling of his thirty-year network of allies and clients, he found that he could still count on the best troops in the country, the Republican Guard commanded by his son, Ahmed Ali, and large parts of the civil service. But the EU and the GCC were adamant – he had to go. At one point, on May 22, 2011, EU and GCC diplomats came under attack from pro-Saleh supporters at the UAE Embassy in Sanaa – they were eventually evacuated by helicopter (Almasmari 2011).

Days later, on June 3, President Saleh was himself badly wounded in a bomb attack on a mosque in the presidential compound and had to be evacuated to Saudi Arabia. But even then, the badly burned President refused to step down and defiantly returned to Yemen a few weeks later. Saleh's decision to resign on November 23, 2011 was prompted by a belief that he had bought time for his family to have a future as a powerbroker (if not complete control) in Yemen and a fear of the international sanctions which the US and European countries threatened to impose against him and his associates if he failed to comply with the Gulf Initiative demand for him to step down (Group 2012). Here UN Special Adviser Jamal Benomar played a critical



role in crafting Resolution 2014, which threatened such a course of action. The pragmatists in the GPC were also vitally important in nudging Saleh to relinquish his presidential powers. On February 21, 2012, Hadi was confirmed as the new interim President of Yemen in an uncontested election with a relatively high turnout of more than 50 per cent.

### Saudi Arabia Changes Course

What had worked? Firstly, Saudi Arabia had decided that Saleh was more of a liability than an asset – he had to go. Secondly, Riyadh realized that replacing Saleh with the strongest military alternative candidate, General Ali Mohsen, was not viable – such an option would be too divisive. Thirdly, the strongest northern tribes, such as the Hashid confederation led by the Al-Ahmar family, were generally despised in the south of the country, not least because of their purported brutal behavior in the south during the 1994 civil war (Stracke & Haidar, 2009). And Hamid Al-Ahmar, one of Yemen's richest businessmen, has ties with the opposition Al-Islah and is seen as closer to the Qatari royal family, operating more independently of Riyadh than his father ever did. The Al-Ahmar clan was not presidential material – at least not yet.

Advised by Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, among others, King Abdullah came to the conclusion that the best course was to go for a slow transition – Yemen would erupt if Saudi Arabia backed either Ali Mohsen or the Al-Ahmar family to take power. Such a power grab would lead to greater instability. Qatar was more openly favorable towards Al-Islah – the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, had long ago decided that Saleh must leave the scene. But Qatari diplomats also conceded that the best hope to avoid a disastrous civil war was a slow, GCC brokered process.

In sum, the GCC countries came to the conclusion that the Yemeni government needed to be fundamentally reformed. Old methods were not working – in the past Saudi Arabia particularly had picked its allies in an informal way, funding projects or simply paying tribes for their support in Yemen. But the Yemeni government had become dysfunctionally corrupt. The tribes too were demanding more and more money – even though loyalties in Yemen were now more complex and some tribal leaders had lost much of their power. A rising population, urbanization, and grievances in the south of the country had rendered old practices inadequate towards dealing with the rise of AQAP in Yemen (Burke 2012). Thus, wiser heads in Riyadh prevailed: A change in course was necessary towards a more transparent and collaborative approach with Western donors. Discussions began in earnest through the Friends of Yemen group and the informal Group of 10 in Yemen (the embassies of four GCC countries – Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE – the EU delegation and the



embassies of the UN Security Council Permanent Member States) as to how to deal with the Yemeni government's lack of capacity and corruption problems. The G10 are the "sponsors and guardians of the GCC initiative" and meet every Thursday. One senior European diplomat described such coordination as "exceptional," the opposite of what has taken place with respect to Syria. Qatar has remained outside the G10 grouping despite an invitation to join upon the re-opening of its embassy in 2013. For now, Doha has preferred to develop its contacts with youth movements and the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen outside the G10 framework. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia remains very wary of the Brotherhood and, by extension, Qatari policy in Yemen. Ambassadors of the G10 group have divided work informally – the US leads on military security reform; the EU and Russia chair outreach and national dialogue; France provides advice on constitutional reform. Such Western pro-activity is welcome but also risks overshadowing the crucial role of the GCC – which is by far Yemen's most significant trading partner. The GCC provided a useful political lead – but it will also need to roll up its sleeves on development and economic issues. Some observers have also questioned a lack of overlap between the work of UN Special Adviser Jamal Benomar and the Friends of Yemen Group.

The EU delegation particularly cannot be faulted for a lack of outreach. The dynamism of its diplomats in reaching out to Hiraak, the Houthi-led Zaydi Shia movement in the north and Yemen's youth movements has been exceptionally useful in calming nerves and bringing these movements into dialogue (Group 2012). The rest of the G10 have looked to the EU to lead on outreach to those parties that did not sign up to the original Gulf initiative – including the Houthi, the Hiraak, and youth movements. The EU is also the key international interlocutor and adviser to two of the nine National Dialogue working groups – the Saada group and the good governance group (the province where the Houthis are strongest). The EU delegation is generally perceived as the most trusted member of the G10 – which testifies to the deft diplomacy and hard work of EU diplomats in Sanaa.

### Hadi Takes Charge

So what has really changed in Yemen? The GCC Initiative was a compromise – change has been mandated within the agreement but progress has been halting. Parliament passed controversial legislation at the end of 2011 guaranteeing immunity for President Saleh. And Saleh has by no means gone away – he is still head of the GPC, which holds a majority of seats in parliament (although it is increasingly fractured). Meanwhile, 17 of the 22 provincial governors are members of the GPC. Former President Saleh is said to be still contemplating a political comeback (Macfarquhar 2013).

Hadi worked steadily to erode the authority of the two most powerful rival military commanders – Ahmed Ali Saleh, the commander of the Republican Guard, and Ali Mohsen, Commander of First Armored Division. He began slowly, stripping away certain brigades from each commander. Hadi also removed members of the Saleh clan from key positions in the security forces – Yahya Saleh was replaced as head of the Central Security Forces intelligence agency, Tareq Saleh as head of the 3rd Armored Brigade and Ammar Saleh as deputy head of the National Security Bureau. Then, on December 19, 2012, President Hadi announced the complete restructuring of the military under a new regional command system directly accountable to the Ministry of Defense. This nominally stripped military potentates Ahmed Ali Saleh and Ali Mohsen of their power. Much of the Republican Guard is to be placed under the direct authority of the president through the creation of a new presidential protection force.

In April 2013, Hadi redoubled his efforts to exert control over the Yemeni military by making a slew of changes at the top of the chain of command. Ahmed Ali Saleh was appointed as Ambassador to the UAE. A number of other senior officers with close ties to the former regime were packed off to diplomatic postings overseas. Hadi knows his time is limited; he has decided to act decisively while surprise, the Yemeni public, and the international community are still on his side. It is a high-stakes gamble; the game is far from over and both men and their allies continue to enjoy residual power in the armed forces. However, Hadi has been careful not to completely alienate General Ali Mohsen, who he recently appointed as his military adviser in the presidential palace. In May 2013, Ali Mohsen led talks with Qatar on boosting security cooperation between the two countries (*Yemen Post* 2013).

Hadi, without a significant power base, intends on creating one. The new Minister of Defense Mohammed Nasr Ahmed is from his province, while the new Minister of the Interior Abdul Qader Al-Qahtan is from Al-Islah – the largest Islamist opposition party with whom Hadi seems to be building an informal alliance of late. Hadi has also appointed southerners and Al-Islah members to other key security positions including Ali Al-Ahmadi (a southerner from Shabwa province) as head of the National Security Bureau intelligence service.

Hadi appears to be implementing a slow but steady plan to put in place his own cadre of loyal security and administrative officials – his favoring of southern candidates to replace those too closely linked with Saleh or the GPC is increasingly apparent (Albrecht 2013). Appeals to Saudi Arabia by the GPC and Saleh acolytes have not won any favor – to date the Kingdom continues to back Hadi. In turn, Hadi has made some progress against what is a pressing security concern for the

GCC – AQAP. In the spring of 2012, Hadi announced an offensive against AQAP in Abyan and neighboring provinces. The operation was generally regarded as a success, although a number of civilians were killed and almost 100 troops were killed in a suicide attack on a military parade in Sanaa. The GCC and the EU remain hopeful that Hadi will continue to take an uncompromising stance against AQAP.

In 2012, President Hadi appointed a preparatory committee in advance of a national dialogue conference which eventually held its first hearings in March 2013. The terms of the national dialogue were decided by a few select people – they argued, reasonably, that they did not want the preparatory committee to become a conference about a conference. The four men who most shaped its terms were the president, the prime minister Mohammed Basindwah, Abdul Karim Al-Eryani (former prime minister and respected elder statesman), and the UN Special Adviser. Hamid Al-Ahmar initially stayed away in protest at the number of seats allocated to the Houthi party. Meanwhile, some southern leaders refused to attend – demanding nothing less than full independence from the north.

The EU has played a discreet and helpful role in persuading various parties to keep faith with the transition process and to take part in the national dialogue when it was convened. The EU has also done an excellent job of facilitating the work of the Secretariat for the National Dialogue and its working committees – the Mediation Support Team of the European External Action Service has offered international examples of best practices on a range of issues upon request by dialogue participants. Nevertheless, the deadline set for completion of the National Dialogue and Constitutional Commission’s work is a daunting one – a new constitution has to be ratified in a referendum, and presidential and parliamentary elections held all before mid-2014. Some local commentators such as Abdul-Ghani Al-Iryani are increasingly frustrated by the tendency of the JMP opposition group to grind the government of the country to a halt as they struggle for more positions in the security forces and government instead of focusing on the urgent task of getting the Yemeni economy back on its feet. An almost complete lack of trust remains between Saleh loyalists in government and new opposition appointees. One senior GPC official observed that, “We know that the Ahmars and their supporters’ plan is to remove the Salehs by removing their supports one by one. Their objective is to destroy the Saleh family and then kill them” (International Crisis Group 2013).

### What Next for the GCC and the EU in Yemen?

President Hadi’s power is largely based on support from outsiders. He is presently seen as the least-worst option by the GCC, at least until the presidential elections

scheduled for 2014. Besides, the UN Security Council has been very clear in its resolution 2051 (2012) that sanctions will be applied against those who seriously jeopardize or undermine the GCC Initiative. Both France and the UK have pushed strongly for such an option to be included in UN Security Council Resolutions. Therefore, even militarily powerful (but increasingly politically marginalized) individuals such as Ahmed Ali Saleh or Ali Mohsen have been reluctant to test international resolve by reigniting the conflict. In August 2012, a group of Republican Guard mutinied following a directive from President Hadi integrating their unit under presidential control and away from Ahmed Ali. But Ahmed Ali balked at openly supporting their revolt – the US embassy was a key interlocutor in getting him to tell the rest of his supporters to desist from violence. The 93 rebels were tried and sentenced to three to seven years in prison in December 2012.

### Keep the Dialogue Going

The EU and some GCC countries have been working to assuage the doubts of the south and the Houthis over the national dialogue conference. The risk of renewed conflict is mounting; the Houthis have expanded their control in Amran province – risking war with the Hashid confederation. Similarly, a security vacuum in the south has given rise to a number of local potentates and extremist groups such as Ansar Al-Sharia, a militant umbrella organization with ties to AQAP. The Houthis and the southerners view the Gulf Initiative process as an elite, Sanaa-dominated process serving US and Saudi interests. They remain skeptical of the National Dialogue. But there are options to allay such doubts and keep both parties within the tent – Qatar has particularly good relations with the Houthi leadership and has vocally supported the transition agreement. Qatar and the EU delegation – and possibly Germany which granted asylum to former member of parliament, Yahya Al-Houthi – should continue to play a persuasive role with the Houthi movement in the future. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia should reach out to the south, not least through the diaspora links between leading Saudi businessmen descended from southern Yemeni migrants. These families, such as the bin Mahfouz and bin Ladin, have the resources and the political weight within Saudi Arabia to greatly enhance both investment and development opportunities for Yemen.

### Aid and More Aid

The EU and the GCC are to be praised for giving more political weight to their efforts to deal with Yemen's alarming levels of poverty. Yemen has the third highest child malnutrition rate in the world at 13 per cent – this has doubled since 2009. Meanwhile, six million Yemenis between the ages of 15 and 28, out of a population

of approximately 30 million, are unemployed and 600,000 college graduates have been out of work for ten years or more. But Yemen has another problem: absorption capacity. Yemen claims it needs \$12 billion of aid now – it will not get it. Thankfully the country is not about to financially collapse – Yemen has increased its financial reserves from \$3.7 billion to \$5.9 billion as of early 2013 (Council 2013).

Despite frustrations on the Yemeni side over a lack of delivery on the part of donor countries, there are some hopeful signs that the relationship could yet improve. At the Riyadh Friends of Yemen conference in September 2012, donors went through the usual ritual of making more pledges of aid support for Yemen. Saudi Arabia pledged \$3.25 billion, for example - current aid pledges stand at almost \$8 billion. The Saudi Minister for Finance Ibrahim Al-Assaf signed three agreements outlining his country's aid commitments. These included a \$1 billion deposit to the Yemeni central bank in addition to development assistance. Saudi Arabia has already provided almost \$3 billion in assistance to Yemen since 2009. The EU High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy Catherine Ashton has pledged \$214 million in assistance to Yemen from the EU. Additionally, Britain promised \$311 million, Germany \$158 million, and the Netherlands \$100 million. Altogether, EU pledges of support to Yemen amount to almost \$800 million. And, unlike in previous years, the aid is beginning to flow – Yemen is now an international priority (Ali Khan 2012; Allam 2012).

But something else also happened to make the Riyadh conference a significant improvement on previous emergency aid summits on Yemen – where large amounts of aid were normally pledged, but only a fraction distributed. In Riyadh, the Yemeni government and the Friends of Yemen group signed a Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF). The MAF has been created as a means of speeding up the Transition Program for Stabilization and Development (TPSD) which will run from 2012 to 2014. It will also be complemented by the summary matrix of the Friends of Yemen group and joint social and economic assessment.

The MAF does exactly what its label suggests – it is a working forum to allow both parties to overcome blockages to aid delivery. It puts the donors under regular pressure to deliver on aid pledges. On the Yemeni side, the MAF involves a strong commitment to transparency and easing corruption. At the Riyadh conference in September 2012, the Yemeni government agreed to establish an anti-corruption court and to improve the autonomy of the anti-corruption commission and the central organization for control and auditing. In turn, the EU and GCC will also help Yemen create special economic zones and provide direct funding to Yemen's social welfare fund. Budget transparency is also prioritized and has already improved.

However, many provisions of the MAF have been slow to take effect – this is in part due to a lack of capacity on the Yemeni side and a deficit of international assistance to remedy this problem. Few governments and international agencies are willing to deploy the requisite numbers of civilian experts to assist Yemen's implementation of the MAF due to security concerns or lack of resources and political will. At the March 7, 2013 London Friends of Yemen conference, EU countries proposed and won approval for the establishment of an Executive Bureau to deliver on the aims of MAF, thereby improving the absorption and monitoring of aid. However, political will and resources are the key – there are a number of talented individuals already working in leadership positions at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) but they often lack the numbers of qualified staff to support their work and the necessary political autonomy to get the job done.

The London conference in March 2013 saw complaints about the Yemeni budget from the EU side – salary costs and fuel subsidies both being the primary targets for criticism. However, a weak, transition government is in no position to cut both in any substantial way and reform will likely have to await the end of the transition process in 2014. Nevertheless, there has been progress in recent years: The Technical Aid Unit in MOPIC has grown in capability and the Social Development Fund has won considerable praise for its mostly transparent use of funds. MOPIC has also developed a GCC Project Monitoring Unit and has urged the development funds of respective Gulf countries to set up representative offices in Sanaa to improve coordination, a commitment that has since been made by the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development. Abu Dhabi is also committed to working regionally in Yemen rather than through the central government, supervising 12 out of 14 projects directly in coordination with local governorates. The Gulf development funds should adopt a more 'hands-on' approach in Yemen, working with their diplomats to overcome obstacles to implementing projects (Burke 2012).

### The GCC - a Very Exclusive Club

The 'carrot' of GCC membership places the GCC in a situation of unique leverage to improve governance in Yemen through the setting of criteria for accession. Improved delivery of services and the easing of corruption will do much to improve the writ of the Yemeni government and, by extension, reduce threats to regional security. Reform is therefore the less dangerous option than the status quo.

Yemen has expressed a desire to join the GCC since 1996. Unresolved border issues with both Saudi Arabia and Oman combined with resentment arising from the First Gulf War initially hindered prospects for an application from Sanaa being



readily received. Following the subsequent warming in relations between Sanaa and Riyadh, Yemen was permitted to join the GCC Education Bureau, Health Ministers Council, Labor and Social Affairs Ministers Council and the Gulf Cup tournament. In March 2005, the Secretary General of the GCC visited Sanaa and offered the tantalising prospect of a GCC-Yemen free trade and investment area. Yemeni hopes were raised further at the Abu Dhabi GCC Summit of the same year when a decision was taken regarding the process of integrating Yemen into the GCC by 2015. Ultimately, however, a concrete plan to steadily integrate Yemen into the GCC never materialized. Yemen has pointedly continued to be left out of the critical economic bodies of the GCC and most importantly not given a path towards joining the Customs Union.

Yemeni officials claimed that unlike their specialized ‘GCC unit’ in Sanaa, the Secretariat in Riyadh had no permanent equivalent ‘Yemen unit.’ Tellingly, by 2008 the GCC unit at MOPIC was desperately searching for an external donor in order to remain operational. Funding from a GCC member state or the Secretariat for the GCC unit did not materialize (MOPICc 2010). However, a recent and very welcome improvement in the GCC-Yemen relationship has been the accreditation of an official GCC representative in Yemen, Saad Al-Arefi, to coincide with the opening of a permanent delegation office in Sana’a.

The main concern restricting Yemen’s prospects of joining the GCC are fears of a large influx of Yemeni migrants. This could be addressed by permitting Yemen to join the GCC, allowing it entry into the Gulf economic zone while not extending the freedom of movement enjoyed by citizens of other member states – this was implemented by the EU, for example, in the case of Romania and Bulgaria who joined in 2007. This would address legitimate concerns over security and GCC countries being swamped by Yemeni labor (Burke 2012). Meanwhile, GCC states should avoid introducing new migration laws that adversely affect Yemen’s stability. In March and April 2013, Saudi Arabia suspended thousands of work permits for Yemeni migrants, which could put up to 300,000 Yemeni workers out of work (The Guardian 2013).

## Conclusion

GCC and EU cooperation in Yemen has come a very long way in a short time, demonstrating unprecedented convergence on Yemen’s future. Much credit is due to the political leaders and diplomats who responded in a coherent and timely fashion to a confusing and rapidly escalating crisis. Several countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar on the GCC side and the UK, France, and Germany for Europe



stand out as being the main drivers of policy formulation and aid delivery. However, this should not obscure the equally critical role of the Secretariat of the GCC and the EU's External Action Service diplomats in fusing the views of their respective member states and providing unity of effort in negotiations with various parties in Yemen. The EU and the GCC have worked well with UN Special Adviser Jamal Benomar, who has been critical to the tentative early success of the Gulf Initiative. This experience has helped to ease mistrust between the EU and the GCC, particularly in some GCC countries where it was previously thought that insurmountable cultural differences between the EU and the GCC prevented effective collaboration in the Middle East. Once skeptical GCC diplomats now talk warmly of their experiences working alongside the EU in Yemen. Put simply, both the Gulf Initiative and the resultant development plan, the TPSD, and the MAF are a credit to European and Gulf diplomacy. Now they must be implemented in full. The transition in Yemen is not even half over. The national dialogue conference is still underway, security sector reform remains halting, elections must be organized, turmoil in the south addressed and AQAP countered.

There are a number of additional steps that the GCC can take to help Yemen. First, GCC countries should look at how they formulate policy towards Yemen – do they have sufficient diplomatic resources and are various ministries across government acting coherently (e.g., the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense in Saudi Arabia)? Should GCC countries send a representative from their respective development funds to reside and work in Yemen?

Second, does the GCC Secretariat have sufficient resources to take a political lead in Yemen on transition and, if not, how should it be better resourced? Third, could GCC membership (in the long term) be used as an effective means of encouraging the type of reform seen in eastern Europe after the fall of communism as countries looked to the prize of EU membership? Even if the process takes twenty years or more, laying down effective accession criteria for Yemen would be a welcome step from the GCC towards incentivizing better governance.

Fourth, Western countries have been very proactive in dividing up issues for reform among them – for example, the US leads on the security sector, and France and Germany provide advice on constitutional reform. But the GCC countries have a wealth of experience to offer on economic development and could divide up areas among themselves – Bahrain could advise Yemen on developing its financial sector; the UAE on infrastructure, ports, and special economic zones; Saudi Arabia on hydrocarbons management, irrigation, and desalinization; and Qatar on education and electricity generation.

The EU has played its limited hand well – Yemen is far from home compared to Tunisia, for example. As this paper has argued, it is the GCC that is the main external actor. It alone has the resources, knowledge, and influence to stabilize Yemen for the future. What Yemen needs is an unrelenting political priority from the GCC and a long-term plan beyond transition. Both the EU and the GCC need to deliver beyond short-term stabilization. Perhaps, most importantly, the GCC member states need to guard against too much divergence in how they approach Yemen. This especially applies to Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In the short term, both Riyadh and Doha saw the Gulf Initiative as a means to contain rapidly escalating violence which would poorly serve both their Yemeni clients and their regional interests. But Doha remains outside the G10 and is a strong supporter of leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood-led Islah party, the youth and Houthi movements in addition to cultivating contacts with leaders from Hiraak. Many Yemeni leaders who are welcome in Doha, including the Nobel peace prize winner Tawwakol Karman, are viewed with antipathy or worse in Riyadh. Some leading Saudi officials regard a fully democratic Yemen as being too much of an unknown quantity for the Kingdom to gamble on – one that would be less easily influenced from Riyadh and prone to instability. They point to Iraq as a neighbor still recovering from a failed experiment in Western-style democracy. And even moderate reformers within Saudi Arabia see Kuwait's empowerment of its democratically elected parliament as a disaster, leading to constant political unrest and populism that has killed off economic investment. They argue that similar powers for the Yemeni parliament would lead to political paralysis or worse. But neither have Saudi officials come up with an alternative vision that meets Saudi interests in Yemen while containing unrest on the streets (Burke & Echague 2009).

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the other four GCC countries have a lot of thinking to do on how to better coordinate their policies on Yemen. The worst-case scenario is one in which Riyadh and Doha compete via their proxies for influence in Yemen with potentially disastrous consequences. That must be avoided. For the GCC, Yemen is a litmus test by which to gauge the Gulf's collective ability to meet emerging challenges to its security. Yemen is a country where the GCC has unrivalled influence. If the GCC cannot act decisively in Yemen, where can it?

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