

## Foreign Relations of the GCC Countries amid Shifting Global and Regional Dynamics

Six years after the Arab uprisings, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have developed an increasingly active posture in their foreign policies towards the Middle East. Alongside the strategic shifts caused by the wave of popular unrest that swept the region from the end of 2010, the GCC countries' foreign policies are increasingly influencing the changes taking place in a number of countries, such as Syria, as well as redefining or restructuring the matrix of regional roles and alliances among the international powers interested in the region, such as the United States, Russia and some European countries.

These developments have prompted many academics and policymakers to argue that the centre of gravity in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region is shifting towards the Gulf region, namely towards Saudi Arabia and Iran, the old regional contenders, and new players (the UAE, Qatar and Oman). During the second half of the twentieth century, the main actors in the region were Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq, constituting a regional order that was deeply influenced by the Cold War. The military intervention in Iraq in 2003, the ongoing armed conflict in Syria, the unravelling of the transition in Egypt after the fall of the Mubarak regime, and the civil war in Libya, coupled with the changing priorities in the region of the Obama administration, have left a power vacuum that the GCC countries have aspired and contributed to filling. This trend is likely to continue in the next years, given the uncertainties that characterise the Trump administration and the increasingly passive role of the European Union (EU) in its neighbouring region.

Two main aspects connected to the increasing activism of the GCC countries in the Middle East stand out. The first concerns the domestic and regional dimensions: the increasing activism of small countries, namely Qatar, the UAE and Oman, seems to be a direct consequence of the shifts caused by the Arab uprisings, as well as of these countries' willingness to capitalise on the wealth they have accumulated and the broad network of relations they have developed with Western policy, business and academic circles. Notwithstanding crucial differences in the three countries' attitudes, their increased regional clout limits the opportunities left for Saudi Arabia to play the role of regional hegemon. Saudi Arabia was traditionally considered the main pillar of the Gulf security architecture, as well as the most powerful factor legitimising US policies in the region aimed at fostering stability. But now, Saudi Arabia itself is witnessing a shift in its foreign policy, in terms of becoming increasingly interventionist and favouring the use of military means to influence political change in neighbouring countries. This was evident in the case of the direct Saudi intervention in Bahrain in February 2011 and in Yemen in 2015, as well as in the support it continues to lend to local opposition groups in Syria. These shifts in the domestic and regional contexts raise the question of whether Saudi Arabia will continue to pursue a strategy of 'omnibalancing' by engaging in a form of power balancing at both the domestic and international levels. Finally, the emergence of the smaller countries on the regional chessboard opens up space for competition and rivalry within the GCC, which may ultimately impinge on the integration prospects of the regional organisation.

The second aspect relates to the international relations of the GCC countries. Indeed, it is possible to speak of an increased 'pragmatism' of the GCC countries' foreign policies with regard to other regional and global powers. This pragmatic attitude is driven by their domestic interests and security requirements (for example *vis-à-vis* Iran), as well as by the need to diversify their foreign relations to include other players, such as Russia, European countries and Turkey. Historically, the United States was the main international player in the Gulf region and the GCC countries were loyal allies, despite tensions that arose from time to time. It can be argued that the shifts caused by the Arab uprisings are defining new rules of the game for the relationship between the United States and the GCC countries. These are reflected, on the one hand, in the US' shifting priorities regarding its policies towards the Gulf and the Middle East in general, and on the other, the changing security perceptions of the GCC countries themselves.

This Special Issue examines the foreign policies of the GCC countries six years after the Arab uprisings in terms of drivers, narratives, actions and outcomes, paying particular attention to Middle Eastern countries, Iran and Western international powers. The assessment focuses on current affairs, but also contributes to establishing a productive link between empirical studies and the existing theoretical frameworks that help explain the increasing foreign policy activism of the GCC countries. All in all, the articles collected in this Special Issue shed light on and provide a more solid and fine-grained understanding of how regional powers like Saudi Arabia, as well as the other smaller GCC countries, act and pursue their interests in an environment full of uncertainty, in the context of changing regional and global dynamics and power distribution.

The Special Issue brings together a selection of articles originally presented and discussed at the Seventh Gulf Research Meeting (GRM) organised by the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge at the University of Cambridge on 16-19 August 2016. We thank the organisers of the meeting as well as all participants in the workshop for engaging in a stimulating debate on one of the most topical issues concerning the future of the Gulf region and the Middle East in general. Furthermore, we wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor of *The International Spectator*, respectively, for their constructive comments and meticulous editing of the various drafts of the articles.

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*Rome-Cairo, March 2017*