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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Schism within the GCC or “the Same Old Tribal Politics”?

by *Elena Maestri*

Since the Arab Spring swept through the Arab world, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been thrust into the limelight again. On one hand, it has increased its cooperation, of which its initiative in Yemen is maybe the most successful example. On the other, the diverse responses of GCC member states to the various internal challenges they are now facing has also opened up areas of fierce contention within the Council. Is this just the same old tribal politics or do we see a schism emerging in the GCC? Are the Arab uprisings propelling the GCC into deeper cooperation?

Diverse Domestic Challenges and Responses

A new delicate phase of development has started in the Arab world and has not left the Gulf untouched. Grass-roots changes can be seen quite clearly in the Gulf, even in most conservative Saudi Arabia. The “virtual world” and the internet culture in Gulf Arab societies are opening up unprecedented opportunities for public debate and

civil society activities.¹ Gulf Arab leaders need to address some fundamental issues, as the calls for political reforms have been gaining strength.² This cannot be decoupled from what is happening in the Gulf’s direct neighborhood, as attested by the influence of the global Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement on the political crisis in Kuwait,³ which has driven the role of expatriate communities in the Gulf and their links to the MB to the forefront. Dubai’s police chief, Dahi Khalfan Tamim, even argued that just like Iran and the transnational Shia network, the transnational Sunni

1 On this aspect, see the analysis of Shafeeq Ghabra, “The Arab Revolutions: A Second Independence,” in Silvia Colombo et al., “The GCC in the Mediterranean in Light of the Arab Spring,” *GMF Mediterranean Paper Series*, December 2012, pp. 5-6, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/the-gcc-in-the-mediterranean-in-light-of-the-arab-spring>.

2 See Abdulaziz Sager, “Reform or Pay the Price,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2011. See also Frauke Heard-Bey, “From Tribe to State. The Transformation of Political Structure in Five States of the GCC,” *CRISMA Working Paper*, No. 15, 2008.

3 Mohammad Alwahaib, “Kuwait: The Crisis and its Future,” *Arab Reform Brief*, No. 63, November 2012, <http://www.arab-reform.net/kuwait-crisis-and-its-future>.

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Muslim Brotherhood network also poses a threat, as “they both want to export the revolution.”⁴

This threat is perceived most urgently by those GCC countries that depend heavily on foreign labor and are thus sensitive to the origin and ideological background of Arab migrants. While Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman urgently face a labor force nationalization process because of their rising youth unemployment, Qatar and the UAE are kept under great pressure from their strong need of foreign labor, specifically from their strategic need of Arab foreign labor.

While facing similar challenges, the UAE and Qatar have taken diverse approaches to the presumed “ideological threat” of their Arab expatriate communities. The UAE has been assuming the Arab Gulf’s long-established confrontational attitude towards the global Muslim Brothers, as attested by the recent arrest of several Egyptian citizens in the country. Qatar, instead, has been trying to get around the problem. It has given leading MB representatives an extraordinary outlet through Al Jazeera and so succeeded in appeasing the movement’s members among its expatriates, while diverting its ideological engagement out of Qatar at the same time. This strategy, combined with Qatar’s quest to assume a key role in the region, has led to unease on the side of its GCC partners, Saudi Arabia first and foremost.

Shared Objectives and Enhanced Cooperation

Beyond such rivalries within the GCC, the major objective shared by all Arab Gulf rulers is to defend the GCC system as a whole. Qatar is no exception. In fact, beyond Qatar’s political ambitions and rising global economic interests, its leaders’ essential aim to guarantee security in the region dovetails with the need to deal with the huge demographic imbalance in their country. Trying to adopt different strategies to address a common challenge is nothing new in the GCC and could also be seen as a deliberate “division of labor” between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Indeed, one of the strengths of the GCC has always been its flexibility, which has allowed the organization to survive more than 30 years, even in case of divergent positions of member states.

Furthermore, instead of a schism, it seems that the Arab Spring has rather re-energized new initiatives “to move

4 Emily Boulter, “Iran and Egypt: An Unrequited Union,” *INEGMA Reports*, February 12, 2013, http://www.inegma.com/reports/Iran&Egypt_Blast/Iran&Egypt_Blast.html.

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from cooperation to union” as proposed by Saudi King Abdullah in 2011. Saudi Arabia’s predominance remains a major obstacle for most member states to move to a closer union, but the fact that enhanced integration continues to be discussed is not irrelevant, and it does not seem to exclude further collective joint initiatives.⁵

The decision of the GCC Development Programme to promote further joint projects in Bahrain,⁶ and the GCC-supported economic initiative of King Abdullah, launched at the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in Riyadh in January 2013,⁷ appear to confirm these convergences. Indeed, this new phase in the Arab world is increasingly characterized by the “economic dimension” of security affecting the redefinition of its member states’ relations with the rest of the Arab world.⁸ Strategies and policies need to be rethought with renewed coordination, without neglecting the institutional limits of the organization.

5 Shadi Hamid, “Old Friends, New Neighborhood: The United States, the GCC, and Their Responses to the Arab Spring,” in Silvia Colombo et al., “The GCC in the Mediterranean in Light of the Arab Spring,” cit., p. 33.

6 *Khaleej Times*, February 19, 2013.

7 *Saudi Gazette*, January 29, 2013.

8 *Al-Raya*, Qatar, February 12, 2013. The prime minister and foreign minister of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor Al Thani, during the first international conference of the Arab and International Relations Council, held in Kuwait in February 2013, underlined that change in the Arab world needs to be conceived within a wider perspective, going beyond uprisings and protests, and addressing economic, social, and cultural aspects. That is a challenge that also involves civil society and the private sector in Arab countries. These words are in line with what was expressed by the Saudi minister of foreign affairs during the 3rd Arab Economic and Social Development Summit. See also *Saudi Gazette*, January 21, 2013.

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The Way Forward

Arab Gulf leaders may look for different options in trying to answer their domestic needs, but since they all need to move toward an evolutionary process of reforms at all levels, regional cooperation may once again prove to be a precious tool for them. The same old tribal politics is at a crossroads in the Gulf: the definition of a serious GCC coordinated agenda for change at political, economic, social, and cultural levels is a crucial step. Only by addressing internal and regional security challenges through enhanced cooperation will the GCC be able to interact more effectively with other partners as well — the EU and the United States included — both in the Gulf and in the Mediterranean.

About the Author

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