



Unpacking the GCC's Response to the Arab Spring

by Silvia Colombo

Since 2011 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been confronted with mounting challenges stemming from the Arab uprisings. Domestically, they have not been immune from the wave of protests that originated from long-simmering social grievances and political exclusion. 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 protests. In some cases, demonstrations 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.

This situation has triggered a mixed reaction in which patronage and partial political and economic reforms have been coupled with repression and even military intervention. At the same time, the GCC member states 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. Upon closer inspection, however, they become meaningful when three main dichotomies – inside vs. outside, monarchies vs. republics and Sunnis vs. Shiites – are taken into account.

The first dichotomy – inside vs. outside the GCC – mirrors 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. Since its formation in May 1981, the GCC has acted as an organization constituted chiefly to help the sheikhdoms maintain their grip on power through security and economic means. Against this backdrop, the Arab spring has been regarded as a threat to their stability, if not survival.

Faced with unprecedented challenges from their own populations, the GCC ruling monarchies have stepped up their conservative approach by lavishing financial blandishments on key sectors of society and engaging in limited political and economic reforms. State patronage has been generous, particularly in 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 package announced by Saudi Arabia in May 2011 is

larger than the country's total annual budget in 2007.¹ Public sector jobs have been offered to young people with a view to quelling the risk of mobilization deriving from high rates of unemployment. Such mass expenditures and an excessively swollen public sector raise doubts about the long-term sustainability of the welfare package and of a policy lacking incentives for the youth to pursue higher education and job opportunities in the private sector.

This response has been accompanied, in the case of Bahrain, by the deployment of military forces in March 2011, to repress the revolts and ensure regime survival. The move was officially presented as an act of defence by a GCC member against "external threats", meaning Iran's meddling in Gulf affairs. The military intervention was also meant to dispel preoccupations of a snowballing effect from Bahrain into other GCC members. 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 GCC, and in particular the tiny sheikhdom of Qatar, has stood out for its support of 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 was the first Arab country to recognize the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC). Qatar crucially supplied the rebels with financial aid, fuel 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 2011.² Despite the stark differences between the Libyan and the Syrian conflicts, Qatar has been able to occupy centre-stage in Syria as well, either reinvigorating the role of the Arab League or guiding the group of countries actively arming the Syrian rebellion. What at first sight may appear as a contradiction in the way in which the GCC has confronted the challenges and opportunities of the Arab spring – counter-revolutionary inside the Gulf area and pro-revolutionary outside of it –, at closer inspection it appears driven by the same logic: to manage instability inside by expanding its clout, and by shoring up or establishing friendly regimes outside.

The second dichotomy – monarchies vs. republics – is pivotal in 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 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

1 S. Hertog, "The Cost of the Counter Revolution in the GCC", in *Foreign Policy*, 31 May, 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/31/the_costs_of_counter_revolution_in_the_gcc

2 D.B. Roberts, "Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya", in *Foreign Affairs*, 28 September, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68302/david-roberts/behind-qatars-intervention-in-libya?page=show>

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 efforts have apparently been successful, as in November 2011 a Saudi-brokered deal was signed that paved the way for Saleh's resignation and for setting the precedent of the so-called 'transition à la Yemen' without regime change. In fact, 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. Instead, it allows the GCC countries to show partial support for the pro-democracy movement by isolating a despised ruler, while maintaining the old system of power that serves the interests of regional stability.

However, this moderately transformative approach has not been followed through consistently. In the case of the Arab monarchies – namely Morocco and Jordan – the GCC has demonstrated an attachment not merely to the broad system of power but to the rulers and the monarchical system of rule as well. The GCC's rallying-around-the-flag vis-à-vis Arab monarchies has led to the extension of its protection and influence over Morocco and Jordan through a pledge of financial aid and a formal invitation to join the GCC as an exclusive 'club of monarchies'.

Finally, the third dichotomy – Sunnis vs. Shiites – boils down to the use of sectarianism as a tool to prop up friendly regimes on the basis of their religious affiliation. Against this backdrop, 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 a heterodox branch of Shiism, the Alawites.

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ABOUT SHARAKA

Sharaka is a two-year project implemented by a consortium led by Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

The project, partially funded by the European Commission, explores ways to promote relations between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), through the implementation of policy-oriented research, outreach, training and dissemination activities. The overall project aim is to strengthen understanding and cooperation between the EU and the GCC, with particular attention to the strategic areas identified in the Joint Action Programme of 2010, such as trade and finance, energy, maritime security, media and higher education.

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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 Shiite Persian Iran. Always fearful of Iran’s regional ascendancy, GCC countries have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the Islamic Republic’s outreach 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, all GCC countries have to deal with the real or potential radicalization of their Shiite communities, which is seen by the GCC as the harbinger of increased Iranian influence in the region. The Arab spring has exacerbated such tensions, unveiling a struggle for power couched in an aggressive sectarian discourse. The notion of a destabilizing “Shia crescent” has been referred to by GCC leaders to justify the intervention in Bahrain, as well as their support for the Syrian opposition. Despite these fears, the Muslim Brotherhood’s electoral victories in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt testify to the emergence of a Sunni-dominated North Africa and Middle Eastern region with a key component of Saudi-oriented Salafism.

These three dichotomies point to a clear ‘double standard’ underpinning the GCC’s approach. Double standards apply to the striking dissimilarities in how GCC countries have reacted to situations that, differences notwithstanding, have challenged the status quo, embodying the struggle against repression and marginalization. Leaving moral judgments aside, questions remain regarding a) whether GCC countries can succeed in quelling pressures stemming from this double standard policy over time and b) the broader implications of the Arab spring for GCC countries and their integration process. These two questions are intertwined since some of the incentives for the creation of a Gulf Union, proposed in late 2011, derive from the need to reduce domestic vulnerability to popular demands for greater freedom and accountability, as well as to project greater influence at the regional and global level. In the long run, the Arab uprisings are likely to produce both a more fragmented Arab world – despite the emergence and consolidation of Sunni-dominated polities – and mounting pressures that patronage and repression by authoritarian regimes will not be able to contain indefinitely. At the Gulf regional level, the fruits of the Arab spring are already visible in the lack of clarity of the Gulf Union’s goals and the increasingly divergent paths followed by GCC member states. The widening gap between the member states’ political systems has already started to influence the GCC and its ability to remain a meaningful organization, regionally and globally. Still unanswered is the question whether the GCC will be able to renew itself and find a new equilibrium in a region in flux or whether its role will become increasingly ceremonial in the years to come. ■

ABOUT THE SERIES

Sharaka Commentaries is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical Gulf issues and EU-GCC relations written by experts and scholars in Europe, the Gulf countries and the North Africa and Middle Eastern region. The series complements the research conducted in the framework of the project Sharaka. The Sharaka Commentaries examine key questions surrounding the political, socio-economic and cultural evolution of the Gulf region as well as the challenges and opportunities in EU-GCC cooperation.