GCC: The People Shall Return Too

A podcast with Larbi Sadiki
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In the special issue of *The International Spectator* you guest edited with Layla Saleh, you argue that the recent wave of Gulf interventionism (in Qatar, but also in Yemen, Libya, Syria etc. is the result of local elites increasingly adopting a principle of what you call 'normlessness'. Can you briefly explain how such normlessness manifests itself in the current scenario in the Gulf?

"Thanks so much indeed for that question. I guess, without putting too much of a dystopian spin on the state of international affairs in the GCC/GCC relations, there is no way of beating around the bush, in the sense that relations in the GCC have reached a point of dysfunction. Really, they are dysfunctional; and I think that this state of dysfunction is what we meant by normlessness.

The absence of those norms, or rules of engagement, that are commonly binding, whether in maximizing the common good, the benefits for all of the member states, or in fending off the things that can potentially harm all of the member states - that's what we mean, in a very parsimonious way, by 'normlessness'.

Take for example Talcott Parsons's masterpiece from 1961 "Order and Community in the International System"[i] , on the issues of order and community in what calls the "social international system" – note that he did not say the "political international system" because there is a society that undergirds any international system, and that is really important – and then note the use of phrases referring to order, community, cooperation, etc. Or think of the perennial search you find also in the works of people like Hedley Bull, when he talked about the anarchical society[ii] and, one may add, the ideal of an international government that plays the role of an intervening force that moderates attitudes and behaviours. What really comes to mind with this idea of 'normlessness' is the question of ethics. We can talk about an ethical turn. Some people have, in the past, raised

the issue, very creatively, of a 'normative turn' in politics – a normative turn in international politics. It seems, in the Gulf, many students of the region tend to spend too much time on security issues, but ethics is inescapable. One must factor it into the equation of understanding GCC/GCC relations, hence this notion of normlessness.

So really, I guess, in a very concise way, if one thinks of a taxonomy of norms, rules of engagement, ethics, within any region or subregional system like the GCC, we think of a continuum of rules. What we have at the top end, is the legally binding charter, that is, the founding charter of the GCC nation states, the six member nation states, and that explicitly framed, in a legal way, the union between the six states, in 1981.

All of that has been flouted in a way that makes you think about the utility, if any at all – the public utility, the political utility, and the social utility – of such a union. We hint at a puzzle, and I think it is a puzzle you cannot escape, that these states came together to frame and formalize the ties that bind them, in 1981, principally to maximize collective security against outside threats, imagined or real, only to discover 39 years later that the threat comes from within – and not from without.

If you go on with that continuum – I guess at the other end – one finds the international norms and rules of engagement such as those relating to international aviation: here then suddenly you have a tripartite boycott by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, all banning Qatar Airways from using their aerial space. Qatar, like Singapore and neighbouring Dubai, is seeking to become a hub in international travel. It is really intriguing how these countries have behaved, as if they've never had this union at all, with hostility coming from within the GCC.

Then in the middle of the continuum we find, of course, the norms of solidarity and mutuality, whether they are tribal or Islamic. Again, they are completely ignored and you can add, of course, interpersonal relations, among Gulf rulers, communities and families, which are also bound up by ties of inter-marriages, kinship, etc. So none of these have provided the kind of glue that brings GCC states closer together and at least prevent this kind of hostility – which is so puzzling.

Until 2015, when there was the withdrawal of ambassadors from Qatar by UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, no one expected that things could escalate into a siege of a fellow member state from the GCC. I guess for us, as it were, the writing is on the wall. What we see is a quintessential example of normlessness in GCC/GCC international affairs.

As you said, 39 years after its establishment, the GCC is going through what looks like a very deep crisis. Now, in your view, one of the reasons for this, is the absence of popular sovereignty, both at a state and regional level, which results in what you call 'missing people in the Gulf'. Now, do you think there is any hope to revert this situation in the short to medium term? And if so, how could this be possible?

"This line of inquiry teases all into thinking further about peoplehood and the role of the people in international relations. That's why we have planted into this special issue and in my article the ideas of Rawls and Habermas. They've been incredibly challenging and creative intellectual devices for thinking about these issues in a systematic way. That is, the notion of popular sovereignty which, as the example of the EU shows, can be dualistic: it is nationalist, it is territorial, it is local, but it has also got application at the level of the regional union. I think that really is a creative way of how to rethink popular sovereignty: it was once upon a time just an internal legal device, but here (and thanks to Habermas, for example), it has a an external dimension.

Of course, that's not to forget that there are limitations from these creative intellectual devices for obvious reasons. But that notion is very useful and draws attention to the primacy of people having a role in international politics. Then you've got Rawls's notion of the law of the peoples, linked to his thinking about reason in public affairs, in internal affairs, which goes really beyond the convention of IR. IR is always tied to formative acts, territoriality, security etc... Suddenly you've got this idea of reasonablesness – qua reasonable attitudes and values, and values of justice and fairness in people-to-people relations.

I think that is the missing link in the chain of GCC/GCC relations: a union, which potentially is good for, as I mentioned earlier, maximising the common good because GCC peoples and states, in theory, have lots of things in common. That is, common sympathies, common bonds, common histories and common ties, tribal or religious, that can be celebrated – but celebrated how? That is the challenging question: perhaps, through at least rules of engagement, that position the people within politics and make them almost like the guardians of the union. You cannot just rely on the political machineries of the different states to uphold that union, and we have seen in the case of the GCC that has not been the case at all.

That's essentially why the reference to the EU and other regional unions is very interesting, at least for policy makers, if you see what has actually been done. It is about the problems; and where the missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of regional integration may be located. So the missing people, as a Deleuzian intellectual device, is very creative, not simply because he is referring to an aesthetic question, which lends so much intellectual muscle to politics, especially in relation to how we can create

the people. He got this phrase about the "people in the state of becoming": how do we actually initiate that, how do we go on to realise that state of creating the people? So there is a juxtaposition, simply because the missing people and the people in the state of becoming are dyadic, they go hand-in-hand: as soon as you hear missing people inevitably what springs to mind is how we can recreate the people.

So, this GCC failure maybe is a sort of a historical moment of awakening for the civil and civic publics within the GCC, to re-think the union along the lines of, as mentioned in the special issue, the Maastricht effect: a referendum, a public referendum, that can actually become the binding glue for such a union. It is a union that of course it has proven its worth since the first and second Gulf war, in the liberation of Kuwait. At the moment, however, what we are experiencing is the malaise of the GCC, the malaise of that union of 1981. It actually needs to be renewed. The renewal of this union needs the missing link, and that missing link are the missing people."

Since the beginning of the year, the COVID pandemic has had a huge impact on public life all over the world. How has the pandemic impacted on politics and civil society in the Gulf? Do you think its impact is more likely to exacerbate pre-existing problems or could rather be the opportunity for some kind of change?

"We all really try to uphold a sense of hope in strange, challenging times, and at times, tragic times, as you have experienced in Italy. The saying goes, there is a silver lining in every cloud. Definitely, I see the pandemic as probably, in the short term, favouring the state because what we have experienced in this region, whether in the Gulf or in the MENA region more generally, is the return of the state. The state basically has returned to assert its authority, as the one that governs and "designs" lives and livelihoods and peoplehoods, whom were the shut down, the locked down.

That is of course on the back of a period of a decade that was launched in Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, with an explosion of civic engagement, of people taking to the streets to reclaim their presence in the public sphere. In lots of countries, from Morocco to Jordan, the state, it seems to me, has managed some of the issues related to the pandemic through the usage of police force and military forces etc. – as if the state is reclaiming that space that was taken or reclaimed by the different Arab/North African protesting publics.

In a Weberian sense, we know what the state is – it's got at least the monopoly of the use of coercion. But in this part of the region, it also has other powers, which it distributes: it does not distribute political power as we know; it distributes another type of power, and that is the goods, the material goods. We talked about the malaise of COVID19, but this is also the malaise of rentierism, and rentier economies.

These states, once upon a time, were equipped with petrodollar largesse to distribute income from oil rent. Today, that distributive power is going to be curtailed. As we saw in the history of US, in the history of the West, especially Western democracies, there is no taxation without representation. Saudi Arabia, for example, has already increased the value added tax from 5% to 15%, and I think wages are being reduced; probably the benefits that were available, let's say a decade ago, are not going to be available in the coming decade. All of this is going to push people into a more inquisitive state of mind thinking about the types of politics they want for their countries.

So, if the time span of change that policy makers functioned with two-three years ago was basically to bring democracy to the region in 15 years, I think now they will revise that. They will probably be in haste first of all to keep this publics in check by continuing to redistribute whatever goods are available to the state, but at the same time to try to address these issues of civic engagement, stability, citizenship, etc.

When we look at the GCC, Kuwait is really at the top end, a country that has got a tradition of elections, a parliamentary type of traditional democracy. Bahrain also experienced the creation of civic parties and associations since the 1920s and 30s. We saw in the Arab Spring the explosion of protest movements, especially the Shiite protest, which of course has been completely banned. So the tools available to each country are different. One can say that the Kuwaitis have got far more tools in the inventory of political activism than, say, their Saudi neighbours. Thus they will probably be far more able to catapult themselves into a state of civic engagement, maybe negotiation with the state for more rights than, say, the Omanis, who have not had that kind of experience over the past decades.

On the whole, I think it's an exciting moment and, as I began with hope, let me finish with hope: I think for me, I see the silver lining, I see the spark of peoplehood, I say that yes, the state has returned, but on the back of that, the people shall return too to keep state dirigisme in check."

[i] In J. Rosenau (ed.). International Politics and Foreign Policy. New York: Free Press, 1961
[ii] H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.