The GCC and the Arab Spring: A Tale of Double Standards

Silvia Colombo

Since 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been confronted with increasing challenges stemming from the Arab uprisings. Internally, they have had to face popular mobilisation and discontent, triggering a mixed reaction, including economic handouts, patronage, limited political and economic reforms as well as military intervention and repression. Externally, they 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, managing instability by shoring up friendly regimes on the inside and expanding the GCC's influence outside represent two sides of the same coin.

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In 2011, the political landscape of the Arab countries was dramatically transformed by the events of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. After decades of ingrained authoritarianism, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen embarked on a process aimed at creating more inclusive political systems based on the rule of law and accountable governance. The movement had many causes, but essentially came out of long-simmering and closely interlinked political, economic and social dissatisfaction. This in turn stemmed from the repression of political, civil and media freedoms, poor governance and economic malaise, compounded by corruption, nepotism, unemployment and a lack of opportunities.

The chain reaction that started in Tunisia in December 2010 then spread across the Arab world to reach the shores of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political, economic and security union made up of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Almost all GCC countries have seen some sort of public protest in one

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form or another. Bahrain and Oman witnessed prolonged street protests, while other GCC countries experienced short-lived public and even virtual demonstrations. In some cases, protests 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. At the same time, however, the GCC has played an important role in supporting the Arab Spring in other Arab countries such as Libya, Yemen and Syria. Here, support has come in different forms, but overall the GCC has sided with the demonstrators, offering media, diplomatic and economic backing – often within larger assemblies such as the Arab League – rather than attempting a mediation between the conflicting parties.

This article aims to assess the GCC's reaction to the Arab Spring, pointing to the striking 'double standard' between its response in its own physical and symbolic space, that is the Gulf region and the ruling monarchies in other Arab states, such as Jordan and Morocco, and outside it. The article unpacks the GCC's responses to the Arab Spring in the short term by focusing in particular on the cases of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It does not intend to tell the whole story of continuity and change in the GCC's involvement with North African and Middle Eastern countries. The Arab Spring and the ensuing transitions are an ongoing process, whose causes and long-term impacts are beyond the scope of this article. What is worth highlighting, however, is that the Arab uprisings have contributed to setting in motion broader dynamics of change in the domestic and foreign policies of the GCC countries, as well as in their mutual relations and their relations with the other Arab countries. It is not possible to understand these complex processes, including the increased competition for influence between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the heightened fragility at the domestic level and the economic dynamics that are likely to hold the development of these countries hostage, without taking into account the context in which they have originated. The GCC countries' short-term responses to the challenges of the Arab Spring can sharpen an understanding of these trends.

Pragmatism is identified as the primary motivation guiding policymakers in the GCC with regard to both domestic and regional events. This approach, which fits perfectly with the longer-term patterns of incremental and managed change by which the GCC rulers have been able to maintain themselves in power, ultimately responds to the need to find the most appropriate policies to secure Gulf interests in the context of a rapidly changing internal and external environment. While this approach can be said to have always informed the GCC's behaviour, it has triggered new dynamics with regard to the particular set of constraints and opportunities created by the Arab Spring

Within the GCC states, the reaction to the uprisings has been a mix of economic handouts, patronage, limited political and economic reforms as well as domestic

repression and even military intervention. While the GCC ruling families continue to enjoy a degree of legitimacy, the question remains whether they can succeed in riding mounting pressure over time. Outside the Gulf area, the GCC has reached out to demonstrators and actively supported them against incumbent authoritarian regimes. Unsurprisingly, the GCC has been particularly keen to back revolutionary movements opposing unfriendly regimes, such as Qadhafi's Libya or Assad's Syria.

It remains uncertain whether the Gulf states can endure the tension embedded in this differentiated approach. In the long run, this double standard policy could induce Gulf regimes to look inward and integrate further in order to reduce domestic vulnerability to popular demands for greater freedom and accountability. Yet, it could be thwarted by what is already taking place: a rift is opening between Qatar's outreach to Islam-rooted movements and parties outside the Gulf area, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the countries undergoing transition, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's clear message to the same forces via the brutal clampdown on the Islamist movements at home. While in the case of Qatar, the support lent to the Islamists is seen as conducive to a greater influence in North Africa and the Middle East, for Saudi Arabia internal repression and containment of the Islamist forces both domestically and regionally seem to be two sides of the same coin.[1]

The article is structured as follows. The first section introduces the concept of double standard and its usefulness in describing the GCC countries' responses to the Arab Spring. The central part of the article explains and assesses the GCC's reaction by making reference to three dichotomies: inside versus outside the Gulf area; monarchies vs. republics; Sunni vs. Shiite. The last section draws some general conclusions and elaborates on how the GCC's double standard approach towards the Arab Spring is likely to impact the strategic outlook of the Arab region.

The Arab Spring reaches the Gulf shores

What will go down in history as the Arab Spring is a complex political phenomenon that goes beyond the uprisings and the fall of a few dictators which kept millions of people glued to television screens, computer monitors and mobile phones in the early months of 2011.[2] The Arab Spring is the result of an intricate interplay of structure, agency, intention and contingency that must be unpacked in order to assess the consequences that it will have both in its individual country-based trajectories and in its cumulative, regional footprint.

The presence of common grievances, the unsustainability of the states, the logic of deliberate diffusion and demonstration effects are all relevant factors for

[1] Al-Anani, "The Advent of 'Informal' Islamists".
[2] Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism".

understanding the unprecedented mass mobilisation witnessed in the Arab world in 2011.[3] In spite of the fact that political, economic, demographic and social conditions in GCC countries differ dramatically from those in North African and Middle Eastern realities, analogic thinking, a sense of commonality and the borrowing of mobilisations frames, repertoires and modes of contention, made the outburst of unrest in the Gulf region possible, particularly in the least oil-rich GCC countries of Oman and Bahrain.[4] In these countries, the impact of such factors was compounded by the crucial importance of shared culture, history and identity across the Arab world.

On 16 February 2011, while the tv cameras around the world were focused on Cairo and Tunis, tens of thousands of people gathered in Pearl Roundabout in the heart of the capital city of Bahrain, Manama, to call for democracy. During the night, Bahraini forces moved into the camp to forcefully remove sleeping demonstrators. On that same night, the GCC held an emergency meeting, during which it pledged to support the Khalifa ruling family. Repression of the protests that continued in the following weeks and months led to a death toll of more than 45 people. Up to 1,500 people were arrested and several thousand more fired from their jobs from February onward.[5] In Oman, unrest erupted after hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets in the northern port city of Sohar demanding jobs and an end to corruption. Sultan Qaboos swiftly responded by firing 12 cabinet ministers and raising government salaries while agreeing to boost unemployment benefits and minimum wages by 40 percent. These measures brought calm back to the country.

Beyond the drivers and the rationale of the popular mobilisation that has invested the Gulf region, attention will focus here on the GCC countries' responses that are likely to assist or hinder the long-term processes of change in the region.[6]

Explaining the GCC's responses to the Arab Spring

The concept of double standard refers to the striking dissimilarities in the way in which the GCC countries have reacted to situations which, in spite of some important differences across the region, on the whole called into question the existing status quo and embodied the struggle against the lack of freedom and opportunities for large sectors of society, particularly the youth. This concept is used as an analytical and explanatory tool here, without the negative judgment

[3] On the first two factors, see Colombo, *The Southern Mediterranean*; on the others, see Patel *et al.*, *Fizzles and Fireworks*.
[4] Beissinger, ''Structure and Example''.
[5] Coates-Ulrichsen, ''Bahrain's Uncertain Future''; ''Shouting in the Dark'', *Al-Jazeera*, http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html.
[6] For the sake of clarity, the stress here is on the need to decouple the process of authoritarian breakdown from the process of transitioning out of authoritarianism toward democracy.

often implied by the term. What follows is an attempt to make sense of the GCC's double standard in light of the Arab Spring through three main dichotomies ingrained in the way the GCC countries frame the world and their role in it. These dichotomies are related to the spatial and political dimension (inside vs. outside), to the nature of the regime (monarchies vs. republics) and to religious identities (Sunnis vs. Shiites) and help illuminate the motives underlying the GCC countries' pragmatic response. By understanding the GCC's pragmatism, the double standard approach emerges as less schizophrenic than first meets the eye.

Inside vs. outside the GCC

The inside vs. outside dichotomy reflects the geographical separation from the rest of the Arab world of the GCC countries as a well-defined, but so far only loosely integrated, sub-regional reality.[7] Since its formation in May 1981, the GCC has chiefly been a means to help the sheikhly regimes maintain their grip on power through security and economic measures.[8] This objective has been achieved by excluding other entities, be they would-be regional powers such as Iraq and, even more so, Iran, or poor and unstable neighbours such as Yemen.[9]

From the 'inside' angle, the regimes of the Gulf states have considered the Arab Spring a threat to their stability, if not survival, consequently warranting a determined coercive response. Prioritising the internal status quo over abrupt change or gradual democratic reform has always been business as usual for regimes that are among the most conservative in the world. It is thus not surprising that, faced with unprecedented challenges from their own populations, the GCC ruling monarchies chose to step up their conservative approach. The GCC counter-revolutionary strategy has two prongs. On the one hand, the GCC countries have lavished financial inducements on key sectors of society and engaged in limited political and economic reforms. On the other hand, they have harshly repressed revolts and even intervened militarily to ensure regime survival.

State patronage has been heavily employed by all GCC countries, but most generously by those states where potential destabilisation has been the highest, that is 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.[10] It includes huge investments in the public sector through job creation and pay rises. In addition, 60,000 new jobs have been created in the Ministry of the Interior, which already employs as many

[7] A number of analyses show that the GCC has achieved only limited cooperation so far and that that has been driven mainly by the issue of regime survival, in which all six ruling families share an overriding interest. Legrenzi, *International Relations of the Gulf*, 1–9.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] *Ibid.*, 113–30; Cronin and Masalha, *Iran and the GCC States*.
[10] Hertog, "The Cost of Counter-revolution".

Saudis as the country's whole private sector. On top of that, 500,000 new houses have been built. Finally, the minimum public sector wage has been increased to a level three times the average private sector wage.

Such massive expenditures by the state raise a serious question about their long-term sustainability. This problem can only be augmented by the combination of sustained demographic growth and a widening gap between rich and poor, all factors that are likely to result in growing demand for more state benefits. Saudi Arabia's national population has grown from 9 million to over 20 million people in the last thirty years. Future projections say it will double over the next twenty.[11] Finally, an excessively swollen public sector does little to induce Saudi youth to pursue higher education or job opportunities in the private sector.

State patronage has been coupled with the introduction of limited political reforms. In September 2011, the Saudi government announced that women would be allowed to vote and run in municipal elections as well as join the all-appointed *Shura* (consultative) Council. However, it remains uncertain whether these measures – in themselves amounting to limited political liberalisation – will actually be implemented, given the opposition of conservative clerics and senior members of the ruling family.[12]

In the attempt to placate domestic political unrest, Bahrain and Oman have also reviewed their fiscal policies with a view to quelling the mobilisation of opposition forces. These measures have basically consisted of expanded entitlement programmes, new public sector jobs and greater subsidies. The government of Bahrain has gone so far as to promise 20,000 new jobs in its Ministry of the Interior, a huge number relative to the country's total national population of less than 300,000 people.[13] Far from reducing the dependency of GCC nationals on public spending and increasing their participation in the private sector, arguably a *sine qua non* condition to ensure socially and economically sustainable development, the regimes have moved in the opposite direction. Interestingly enough, these two countries have also been the object of a combined USD 20 billion aid package from the other GCC countries, a significant proportion of which will most likely be provided by Saudi Arabia. It has to be added that at the time of writing no aid to Oman and Bahrain has yet been forthcoming, which appears to be in line with the GCC's history of making elaborate commitments that promptly fail to be implemented.

The short-term and potentially ineffective nature of these patronage measures was quickly grasped by the other GCC states. The UAE, where some of the pay

[11] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), http://www.escwa.un.org/about/main.asp.

[12] "Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah gives Women Right to Vote, Run in Municipal Elections", *Al Arabiya News*, 25 September 2011, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/25/168602.html; Kinninmont, "Keeping it in the Family".

[13] Hertog, "The Cost of Counter-revolution".

rises announced in 2011 subsequently had to be cancelled as they were deemed unaffordable, is a case in point. Looking for an alternative strategy to quell 190 potential reform movements, the government turned to a ruthless campaign of suppression targeting dissenting voices. As of the end of July 2012, more than 50 political activists and human rights advocates had been detained without charge.

The cause of regime survival and regional stability was taken a step further in the case of Bahrain. On 14 March 2011, soldiers from Saudi Arabia and police forces from the UAE entered the country to protect the ruling Al-Khalifa family, which follows the Sunni version of Islam, against a pro-democracy movement made up mostly of the disgruntled Shia majority. The move was officially presented as an act to defend a GCC member against ''external threats'', meaning Iran. After years of stressing the purely symbolic nature of the GCC's joint Peninsula Shield Force – the military arm of the GCC composed of about 40,000 troops – also with a view to not provoking Iran, its deployment during the Bahraini crisis confirmed that preoccupations about a 'snowball effect' from Bahrain to the other GCC members had reached the alarm level.[14] This was the first GCC deployment in relation to an internal threat.

The GCC's heavy hand against demonstrators in the UAE and 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 tiny sheikhdom of Qatar has stood out for being extremely active in supporting the anti-regime revolts. The Arab Spring context 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 indispensable interlocutor between the (Sunni) Arab world and the West. Qatar's international posture underwent a major shift from its preferred role as political broker in an unstable region – for example in Lebanon, Israel-Palestine, Western Sahara and Afghanistan – to enthusiastic partner in the NATO-led mission that intervened in Libya in support of the anti-Qadhafi rebels.[15]

Qatar was the first Arab country to recognise the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC). It crucially supplied the rebels with financial aid, gas and weapons, mostly through the networks and militias of the prominent Libyan Islamists, Ali and Ismail al-Sallabi. 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 Qadhafi's compound on 24 August 2011.[16] Lying far away from the Gulf shores, the Libyan civil war was the perfect opportunity for Qatar to gain credit as the champion in the battle for freedom, dignity and social justice raging between

[14] Legrenzi, *International Relations of the Gulf*, 78.
[15] Barakat, *The Qatari Spring*.
[16] Roberts, ''Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya''.

entrenched authoritarian regimes and more or less organised opposition forces. To this end, Qatar skilfully took advantage of Al Jazeera, the satellite broadcaster based in Doha, its capital, to rally Arab public opinion around the foreign intervention in Libya and its own role as a key Arab player. In the wake of Qadhafi's downfall, however, Qatar's policy in Libya has been increasingly viewed by some members of the Libyan National Transitional Council as controversial, owing to its scale and alleged intrusion into the country's sovereignty. What is sure is that the sheikhdom has continued to build up direct channels of communication with (and influence over) both Islamist parties and civil society forces. Observers also suspect that Qatar is hoping for preferential access to Libyan energy supplies and improved access to European gas markets.[17]

International circumstances and interests have not aligned to allow Qatar to push for an external intervention in the Syrian civil war. Nonetheless, the inability of the UN Security Council – blocked by an apparently unbridgeable gap between Western powers, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other – to forge any form of concerted international response to the crisis has given Qatar the chance to occupy centre-stage there as well. Interestingly, Qatar initially worked to reinvigorate the role of the Arab League, which it considers a useful sounding-board for framing the debate on the Libyan and Syrian crises according to its own preferences. As has been the case in Libya, Qatar has gradually moved in the direction of a more incisive role in Syria – in spite of the lack of convergence at the broader international level – by sending the Syrian rebels weapons and economic support. The fact that Qatar was the first Arab country to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus in July 2011 and that Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani even contemplated the intervention of Arab troops to hasten Assad's removal in January 2012 are clear signs of Qatar's preferred course of action.

Qatar's emergence as an increasingly assertive Arab power has, however, placed it in direct competition with Saudi Arabia, with which it has long had a rocky relationship. Generally speaking, smaller Gulf countries like Qatar are concerned "about a too tight embrace of the GCC heavy weight Saudi Arabia, which in turn is anxious to assert influence over its junior partners".[18] The differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, not only in foreign policy, have been heightened by the Arab uprisings. The former views the Arab Spring as an opportunity rather than a challenge and the countries undergoing transition as a wide-open door to be walked through to increase its influence. For instance, in its treatment of the Islamists in Egypt – emerging in this country and throughout the region as the new leading political force – Qatar has not only hugely capitalised on its connections to some of them, most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood's intellectual leader, the Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for whom it had provided

[17] Woertz, *Qatar and Europe's Neglect*, 5.
[18] *Ibid*.

refuge since 1961, but also made use of the powerful Al Jazeera network to build what has been defined as a ''love affair with the Muslim Brotherhood''.[19] In the case of Egypt, the coverage provided by Al Jazeera, and in particular of its newly-formed Egyptian subsidiary channel, Al Jazeera Mubashir Misr, has been openly in favour of the Egyptian Islamist faction that dominated the 2011–12 parliamentary elections. In light of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as the most successful and organised political actors in most Arab countries in the wake of the Arab Spring, Qatar's courting of the Islamist forces has provided it with significant leverage among the new political actors in the Arab world. This is dictated more by the pragmatic need to expand its influence than by any sort of ideological affinity.

It is worth stressing that the overt support lent by Qatar to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere has come at a cost. Qatar's reputation for impartiality has been blown apart and deeper changes in its foreign policy are to be expected. Although a recent analysis of Qatar's widely-hailed foreign policy has emphasized a lack of monitoring and implementation capacity, meagre professional expertise and the apparent absence of a long-term vision,[20] Qatari policymakers were able to cut out a niche for the country in diplomatic mediation based, in large part, on a reputation for being a relatively impartial, honest broker without the historical or religious baggage of for example Saudi Arabia. Instead, Qatar has now revealed itself as a much more self-interested foreign policy actor intent on expanding its clout. The result is that in the future it is far more unlikely that we will see impartial Qatari foreign policy stances towards other countries in the area, meaning a diminished foreign policy role rather than a more assertive one.

Saudi Arabia has adopted a completely different stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Concerned about the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood's ideological competition to the Wahhabi groups allied with the ruling family, Riyadh has constantly suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood's movements and affiliates at home, under the guise of an escalation in surveillance and repression since 2011.[21] Also, it has arguably adopted an increasingly suspicious and even aggressive stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere, turning its back on the Tunisian and Egyptian leaderships. Fearing the possibility of spillover, the Saudis have been funding the Salafist Nur party as a counterbalance to the Justice and Freedom

[19] S. Al-Qassemi, ''Morsi's Win is Al Jazeera's Loss'', *Al Monitor*, 1 July 2012, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/morsys-win-is-al-jazeeras-loss.html.

[20] Kamrava, ''Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy''.

[21] A sort of hysteria concerning the threat of a Muslim Brotherhood empowerment in the Gulf has spread to the UAE as well. In March 2012, the Chief of the Dubai Police, Lieutenant-General Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, informed a Kuwaiti newspaper of a Brotherhood plot to take over the GCC states by 2016, beginning with Kuwait in 2013. According to some accounts, the threats stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood must be given the same importance as those coming from Iran. See ''Islamists Plot Against Gulf: Dubai Police Chief'', *Gulf News*, 27 March 2012. http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/islamists-plot-against-gulf-dubai-police-chief-1.999524.

Party in Egypt.[22] This provides substance to the argument that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have come to support alternative parties and factions in the new political game in the Arab countries. While the former seems more inclined to lean towards moderate/pragmatic Islamists as its preferred interlocutors, and to a certain extent clients, in the region, the latter seems to be playing in favour of a more conservative kind of Islamism embodied by the Salafists.

It is important to stress, however, that this Saudi-Qatar competition is the result of the growing liberalisation of the Arab political scene, whereby new actors have had access to it and have found support from different patrons. This competition, which is likely to increase in the long run, does not detract from the largely unitary short-term response to the challenges and opportunities of the Arab Spring. An example of this is the fact that Saudi Arabia has increasingly converged on the Qatari position on Syria, moving from a more conservative stance during the first phase of the Arab Spring to a more revisionist approach. In August 2011, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador to Syria and pushed for an end of the Arab League's observation mission in January 2012.

In conclusion, setting aside the increasing Saudi-Qatari competition, it can be argued that the GCC's choice to follow opposite paths in confronting the Arab Spring challenge – counter-revolutionary inside the Gulf area and pro-revolutionary outside of it – seems to be driven by the same logic: to manage instability by shoring up friendly regimes on the inside and expanding its clout outside. Upon closer inspection, even what may appear as diverging domestic and foreign policy strategies by the two most powerful members of the GCC, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, boils down to the inside vs. outside dichotomy. As aptly stressed by Rime Allaf, ''while Riyadh took the overt lead during the Yemeni and Bahraini uprisings, keeping them within the Gulf Cooperation Council, it was happy to leave Qatar to play the primary role in the Syrian revolution and in pushing the case to the Arab League''.[23] This apparent division of labour between Saudi Arabia and Qatar – whereby the former is the guardian of the status quo inside the GCC, while the latter cultivates its role as the champion of Arab public opinion with a view to increasing its projected influence – is functional to the attainment of the common goal of managing instability internally and externally. Put simply, emphasizing different foreign policy paths between the two members in order to explain the two most significant military interventions by GCC countries in 2011 – in Bahrain and Libya – obscures more than it reveals.[24]

[22] Y. Trofimov, ''As Islamists Flex Muscles, Egypt's Christians Despair'', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304432304576371484109592252.html.
[23] R. Allaf, ''Qatar's Influence Increases in the Middle East'', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2011.
[24] Forsythe, ''Buffeted by Winds of Change''.

Monarchies vs. republics

A second relevant dichotomy underpinning the GCC's response to the Arab Spring is between monarchies and republics. This is pivotal to understanding the different attitudes adopted by the GCC countries *vis-à-vis* Morocco and Jordan, on the one hand, and Yemen, on the other. The former two countries experienced some domestic unrest that did not, however, jeopardise the stability of the ruling monarchies. By contrast, Yemen was the theatre of a prolonged conflict between the regime of Abdallah Saleh and opposition forces. Out of concern that the situation could escalate into civil war and spiral out of control, the GCC countries sought to find a way out of the crisis. Their efforts were apparently successful, as a Saudi-brokered deal paved the way for Saleh's resignation (in return for a guarantee of immunity) in November 2011.

The GCC countries, and in particular Saudi Arabia, have mostly looked at Yemen through the lenses of counterterrorism, as the country is a haven to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), perhaps the most threatening of all of Al Qaeda's regional offsprings. The GCC countries have consequently cultivated their relationship with Yemen, even directly supporting the Saleh regime against the Houthi rebellion that has been ongoing since 2004. In return, they received Saleh's cooperation in tackling the terrorist threat. As Saleh was confronted with the arguably more pressing urgency of ensuring his regime's survival, however, he was increasingly viewed by the GCC as unable to deliver on counterterrorism. In fact, his desperate attempt to cling to power in the face of massive protests ultimately made him a liability for Riyadh and other Gulf capitals. In turn, the GCC countries opted for hastening Saleh's departure from power, while trying to carve out a role for themselves that would enable them to influence Yemen's future trajectory.

The GCC countries, and in particular Saudi Arabia, are not keen on seeing independent civic movements – made up mainly of youth – take power in Yemen, as they fear a spillover effect into their own territories. Accordingly, the Saudi-brokered deal has not met 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 some support for the pro-democracy movement and at the same time isolate a despised ruler, while maintaining the old system of power that serves the interests of regional stability. This moderately transformative approach has not been adopted consistently however. In the case of two Arab monarchies – namely Morocco and Jordan – the GCC has shown an attachment not merely to the broad system of power but to the rulers themselves.

The fact that Yemen is a republic rather than a monarchy helps explain why, when push came to shove, the GCC was ready to let President Saleh go for the sake of regional stability. By contrast, the far stronger support for monarchies facing

domestic turmoil can be read as an attempt by the GCC to defend not merely the monarchs in power, but also their monarchical system of rule. At the same time, the GCC's 'rallying-around-the-flag' vis-à-vis Arab monarchies extends its protection and influence over Morocco and Jordan.

This interpretation is reinforced by the GCC's unprecedented attempt to forge a new identity, based not so much on geographical proximity as on political affinity. Rather than a regional organisation, the GCC prefers to see itself as a 'club of monarchies'. The rationale of this shift is simple: the GCC countries, concerned about the potentially disruptive consequences of the Arab Spring, are betting on the fact that, as the old adage goes, 'there is strength in numbers'. By reaching out to the regimes of Jordan and Morocco in a period of turmoil with a pledge of financial aid – USD 2.5 billion to each country, in addition to existing bilateral aid – and by inviting them to join their exclusive club, the GCC countries have attempted to shore up their own stability. The substantial aid made available to Jordan and Morocco shows that GCC leaders tend to see rising discontent in the Arab monarchies as simply the result of economic, and not political, difficulties, something that can be assuaged through economic stimuli and poverty reduction.

By comparing the GCC's different treatment of Jordan and Morocco, on the one hand, and Yemen, on the other – without overlooking that Yemen has vainly been seeking membership of the GCC for years – the monarchies vs. republics dichotomy stands out as a relevant explanatory factor underpinning the GCC's response to the Arab Spring. All in all, the GCC countries have attempted to demonstrate that the Arab Spring is a malaise affecting the Arab republics, not the monarchies. This line of reasoning aims at increasing the distance between monarchies and republics in the Arab world by artificially singling out the latter as fertile ground for protests and regime capitulation.

Sunnis vs. Shiites

The search for a path to emerge unscathed from the Arab Spring has also led the GCC countries to play the card of sectarianism. Being an exclusive 'club of monarchies' harbouring the Sunni, a rather puritan, form of Islam, it comes as no surprise that the GCC countries have attempted to prop up Sunni forces across the region. GCC support has gone both to authoritarian Sunni regimes threatened by a Shiite opposition representing the majority of the population (for example, the case of Bahrain) and to anti-authoritarian Sunni 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).

The Sunni-Shiite divide is probably the oldest and most important schism in the history of Islam. However, insofar as that dichotomy can help understand the rationale of the GCC's response to the Arab Spring, it is necessary to recall its underlying geopolitical undercurrents. 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. The relationship between the GCC and Iran has never been easy. As recalled above, the birth of the GCC in the early 1980s was to some extent a direct response to the new geopolitical situation created by the establishment of a revolutionary Shiite regime in Iran. Sectarian interests have thus been at the core of the GCC project since its onset.

Always fearful of Iran's regional ascendancy, GCC countries have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the Islamic Republic's outreach and influence after the US' 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 of that, all GCC countries have to deal with the real or potential radicalisation of their Shiite communities. In Oman, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait, these communities are relatively well-integrated into the socio-political fabric and share the general economic prosperity enjoyed by the rest of the population. As such, they pose no direct danger to the ruling regime. But in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shiite communities are politically, economically and socially marginalised and are often portrayed by the government as a threat to social cohesion and national stability. The numerical strength of these communities, representing around 70 percent of the population in Bahrain, as well as their concentration in strategic areas and industries, such as the oil-rich eastern province of Hasa in Saudi Arabia (where they make up between 40 to 60 percent of the workforce in the oil industry), are not taken lightly by the ruling regimes.[25] Rightly or wrongly, they see Shiite demands for an end to their marginalisation and exclusion as the harbinger of increasing Iranian influence in their countries.[26]

These potentially explosive conditions have not prevented GCC countries from developing an ambiguous relationship with Iran. As argued by Cronin and Masalha, this has taken place mainly at the bilateral level. Unable to formulate a collective approach to Iran within the GCC, individual Gulf states have opted for seeking a manageable relationship with Tehran on their own.[27] The most enterprising of them have even found a way to profit from Iran's relative international isolation. The UAE, for instance, has become the main exporter to Iran, as well as the largest re-exporter of Iranian goods (including to the United States). These partly cooperative links between Iran and individual GCC states have not, however, gone beyond ad hoc pragmatic arrangements. Lacking a shared understanding of the region's strategic outlook, latent tensions between the GCC and Iran have persisted.

[25] Cronin and Masalha, *Iran and the GCC States*, 23.
[26] Coates-Ulrichsen, *Gulf Security*.
[27] Cronin and Masalha, *Iran and the GCC States*, 5–6.

The Arab Spring has exacerbated such tensions. Iran has been seen as potentially expanding its influence, for example in Egypt where the fall of pro-US President Hosni Mubarak has been followed by an improvement in relations with Tehran. The crossing of the Suez Canal by two Iranian warships heading for Syria as early as February 2011 – something unheard of in previous decades – was interpreted as a bad omen on the Arab shores of the Gulf.

In both concrete and rhetorical terms, the new struggle for influence in the post-Arab Spring Middle East has been couched in aggressive sectarian discourse. The notion of a destabilizing ''Shia crescent'' – a term referring to Iran, the ascending Shiite parties in Iraq, the Alawaite regime in Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah first coined by Jordan's King Abdullah II[28] – has found new meaning. For instance, GCC leaders used it to justify the intervention in Bahrain. They accused the protestors in Bahrain – largely but not exclusively coming from the economically disadvantaged Shiite community – of serving Iranian interests, and the latter of fomenting or otherwise encouraging the protests.[29] The GCC has applied the same, albeit reverse, logic to Syria: an Alawite regime repressing a pro-democracy Sunni rebellion. Hence in Syria, the GCC has not hesitated to denounce strongly the atrocities committed by the regime and has actively supported the 'Syrian revolution' with a view to grasping the opportunity to turn Syria away from its current orientation towards Iran.

The Sunni vs. Shiite dichotomy is particularly sensitive for Saudi Arabia. The Saudi monarchy has historically drawn legitimacy from religion, as the guardian of the cradle of Islam, the cities of Mecca and Medina.[30] The emergence of a credible challenge to this self-appointed role is potentially the greatest danger to its authority.

The challenges ahead

Pragmatism has guided the GCC's responses to the Arab Spring and ties in with the double standard explaining the otherwise paradoxical behaviour by which the same countries supporting the opposition to autocracy in some cases, foremost Libya and Syria, are simultaneously complicit in reinforcing and defending the status quo in other cases, for example Bahrain but also Saudi Arabia. What does this double standard imply for future developments in the MENA region? Moving from the micro level to the macro level, three broad points emerge.

First, the GCC's policy towards the Arab uprisings reflects a certain degree of convergence among the Gulf states, but has also laid bare significant differences, in particular between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Saudi Arabia has adopted a more

[28] Lynch, ''The What Cooperation Council?''.
[29] ''Shouting in the Dark'', *Al-Jazeera*.
[30] Niblock, *Saudi Arabia*.

conservative approach, whereas Qatar has displayed a more progressive attitude, particularly in Libya and Syria. These differences are predominantly linked to the political culture and approach, more than to the content of the GCC's response to the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, like other GCC countries, share the short-term objective of moving the Arab Spring along a pattern which might expand, rather than jeopardise, their regional influence. In the short term cooperation has prevailed over competition, but it is not possible to discount the possibility of simmering political tensions and confrontation between Riyadh and Doha. Gulf leaders, at least some of them, are aware of this potential evolution, and are wary of the risk it entails. Talks of a possible upgrade of the Gulf Cooperation Council into a Gulf Union have their roots in these strategic considerations, as well as in concerns about the organisation's continuing relevance, regionally and globally.

Second, the massive resort to state patronage to defuse domestic demands for greater political participation cannot last forever. Not only is it unsustainable for economic and fiscal reasons, as discussed earlier, but even less so for reasons connected to the legitimacy of the regimes in power. If there is something that the Arab Spring has made clear is that the old ways of buying the opposition's silence through patronage and corruption might not work forever. State patronage entails a serious risk of backlash: inasmuch as it expands entitlements, it raises public expectations to levels potentially unsustainable for the state. Countries such as Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia could face a self-created existential threat in the years ahead. The huge domestic social spending pledged since the start of the Arab Spring, amounting to 12.8 percent of the GCC's total GDP for 2011, will contribute to inflationary pressure and may be unsustainable. A clearer strategy for growth and investment as well as a new sustainable social contract between Gulf states and their citizens are needed.[31]

Politically, the signs of fragility besetting the incumbent regimes have increased: the aging monarchical system and the succession question are increasingly becoming issues attracting attention and fears in Saudi Arabia and Oman. The former has had to deal with the death of two crown princes in less than one year, while in the latter, the succession to Sultan Qaboos remains uncertain at a time of escalating strikes, demonstrations and the voicing of hitherto taboo direct criticism of the Sultan himself.

A final conclusion concerns the merits of the GCC's double standard policy and its future implications for the Gulf states and, indirectly, for Western powers. The measures that have been adopted by the GCC in their own space and in particular in Bahrain are in stark contrast with the Arab Spring's pro-democracy flavour. Yet, Western democracies have not objected to this. The prompt repression of the Bahraini revolt and the GCC's activism on other Arab Spring fronts such as

[31] I. Saif and R. Fakhoury, ''Lessons for the Gulf's Twin Shocks'', *International Economic Bulletin*, 16 February 2012, 5, http://carnegieendowment.org/ieb/2012/02/16/lessons-from-gulf-s-twin-shocks/9omu.

Libya and Syria have freed the West from the incumbency to have to intervene. Criticism of the GCC's intervention in Bahrain was immediately silenced for fear that a hard stance could jeopardise the West's well established relations with the Gulf regimes. The West now seems to be looking with some suspicion at the mounting opposition forces as they raise concerns that greater political representation might harm the West's interests and agenda in the region. In a longer-term perspective, however, the Western preference for Gulf stability amidst the winds of change across the Arab world may prove unwise. If indeed the Gulf regimes are unable to address the problems sketched above and lose their grip on power, the West will again find itself on the wrong side of history and lose much of its influence in the region.

To date, the greatest failure of the Arab Spring is Bahrain. Looking ahead, the future of the Arab world may hinge on this tiny island whose prospects today seem bleak and whose small size conceals its importance for broader regional and global balances.

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