

NOREF Policy Brief

Regional security co-operation in the smaller Gulf states

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Executive summary

This policy brief examines the challenges facing regional security co-operation in the five smaller Gulf States. It demonstrates the resilience and durability of intra-regional differences, particularly scepticism of Saudi Arabia's greater size and regional objectives. With the notable exception of Bahrain, differences of outlook have continued into the post-Arab Spring period as Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman hold significant reservations about moving toward a closer Gulf union. The Arab Spring has injected urgent new domestic considerations into a regional security complex hitherto marked by external instability. Yet the bold political action and

longer-term planning that is needed to address these issues is lacking, because ruling elites prioritise short-term policies designed to ensure regime security in a narrower sense. This means that security remains defined in hard, "traditional" terms and has not evolved to include the security of individuals and communities rather than rulers and states. The future of regional security co-operation is therefore uncertain and bleak, and the closing of ranks may yet herald a closer Gulf union as rulers come together to deal with the pressures generated by the Arab Spring.

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The events of the Arab Spring have injected urgent new considerations into regional security co-operation among the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states. Saudi Arabia has led attempts to form a closer union and King Abdullah's proposals were discussed at the Consultative Summit of the GCC in Riyadh on May 14th 2012. However, little consensus emerged among the five smaller Gulf states, with the notable exception of Bahrain. This is unsurprising, as the GCC has struggled to widen its integrative process and overcome lingering scepticism about Saudi hegemonic designs in the Gulf. Significant differences remain unresolved and these will continue to complicate regional security structures in the near and medium term.

Security in transition

The regional security architecture in the Gulf is in a state of flux. The three major inter-state wars between 1980 and 2003 reshaped the balance of power and left the GCC states reliant on the U.S. as their external security guarantor. Yet the challenges facing the five smaller Gulf states today are twofold. The first is how best to manage any threats to external stability posed by post-occupation dynamics in Iraq, the ongoing dispute between Iran and the international community, and continuing overlapping conflicts and state fragmentation in Yemen. All three areas present a combination of material and ideational threats to the Gulf States, combined with the threat of overspill from any potential conflict.

The second challenge is the new threat to internal security – seen by ruling elites as synonymous with regime security – in the wake of the Arab Spring. As elsewhere in the Arab world, the rise of a politically conscious generation of youth wired together as never before by modern communication technologies (cell phones, the Internet, etc.) has dramatically changed the parameters of protest and opposition in the Gulf states. In Bahrain and Kuwait, the emergence of new youth-led movements that are less willing to respect the old “rules of the game” presents a challenge both to the established political societies and to governments. In Oman, economic discontent generated a wave of strikes that briefly turned violent in February 2011 and since have

generated unprecedented public criticism of the sultan. Moderate calls for political reform goaded the leadership of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) into arresting more than 50 activists in 2012 amid a general closure of civil society organisations. Only Qatar, with its fortuitous combination of high resource endowments and low population has remained immune from the participatory pressures.

Other areas in which the concept of regional security is being reformulated include the emergence of food security strategies in Qatar and the UAE, and growing Gulf-Asian linkages, particularly with China, India and South Korea. However, certain non-military and longer-term threats to security, such as those from anthropogenic climate change, environmental degradation and eventual resource depletion, notably remain off the radar of national and regional security agendas. Nor is there the political will to tackle the sensitive domestic issues of unsustainable fiscal policies and energy consumption, which, if unaddressed, will call into question the maintenance of the social contract that has underpinned the redistributive ruling bargain in these states since the 1970s.

Lack of consensus

Concerted and long-term planning is required to meet the challenges described above. This notwithstanding, policy formulation in the smaller Gulf states remains the preserve of small and tightly knit circles of elites. Continuing personalisation hampers attempts to institutionalise policymaking processes and structures, and renders decisions vulnerable to sudden change or reversal. The abrupt withdrawal of the UAE from the GCC monetary union project in 2009 the day after the central bank was awarded to Riyadh rather than Abu Dhabi is a case in point. Another is the two unexpected announcements by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia inviting membership bids from Morocco and Jordan (in May 2011) and proposing a deeper confederation (in December 2011). On each occasion, decisions taken by individual rulers took precedence over formal institutions such as the GCC Secretariat based in Riyadh.

This is not a new phenomenon; rather, it has been a feature of the GCC since its inception

in 1981. Although it was formed as a defensive reaction to the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, it was neither a political nor a military alliance, and it lacked an integrative supranational decision-making institution for the sharing of sovereignty akin to the European Commission. The GCC also suffered from lingering suspicion among the smaller Gulf states, particularly Qatar, but latterly also the UAE, of the potential for Saudi hegemony or dominance within the organisation. Qatari-Saudi relations, in particular, were strained by border skirmishes in 1992 and 1994, and by Qatari allegations of Saudi involvement in two coup attempts against Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, in 1996 and 2005, respectively.

These lingering intra-regional tensions complicated moves toward reaching common policies on regional issues, and continue to do so today. The six GCC member states have been unable to agree on the nature and extent of the threats posed by Iraq, Iran and Yemen, thereby making it virtually impossible to adopt a regional approach to these issues. Moreover, each member state has been integrated into the U.S. security umbrella on a bilateral basis, with Bahrain and Kuwait additionally being designated as major non-NATO allies in 2002 and 2004, respectively. This strategic reality is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future and undermines any moves towards regional security co-operation. It is additionally reflected in the current state of low interoperability between GCC member states' air, land and sea forces.

An uncertain future

Bahrain apart, the small Gulf states view Saudi proposals for a closer Gulf union with considerable misgivings. The suggestion was unveiled by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia at the GCC Summit in Riyadh in December 2011 and given greater clarity in a speech by Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal in April 2012. This called for a "supreme Gulf committee" to oversee a Gulf-wide GCC union with an integrated military and regional foreign policy. In February and April 2012 a joint committee of three representatives of each state met to prepare its findings for the

Consultative Summit held in Riyadh on May 14th 2012. Supporters of the plan, including the prime minister and the minister of information in Bahrain, cited the European Union as a model of supranational integration.

In the event, the much-hyped summit made little progress. The rulers of Oman and the UAE failed even to attend the meeting, and the only concrete output was that Gulf interior ministers were authorised to sign an amended security agreement stipulating full co-operation between member states to preserve collective stability and security. This replaced a previous security agreement dating back to 1994. It has already been invoked – albeit only in declaratory terms of support against a "conspiracy targeting national security" – when the GCC secretary-general gave the UAE the organisation's full support after it launched a wave of arrests of members of the Islamist al-Islah group in July 2012.

The trajectory of events since the start of the Arab Spring demonstrates that low-key security co-operation will be far easier to achieve than full co-operation on defence and foreign policy. Aside from Bahrain, the smaller GCC states remain unwilling to relinquish their sovereign powers to a union they suspect will inevitably be dominated by Saudi Arabia. Officials in Kuwait and Oman publicly opposed moves that might change these countries' political structures and inflame domestic sectarian tensions. Powerful desires for autonomy have guided Qatar's independent foreign policymaking since the 1990s and also were behind the rise of it and the UAE as regional powers with an international reach.

Divergent trajectories

Regional security policy in the smaller Gulf states is evolving to meet a combination of internal and external pressures. These revolve around mistrust of Iran and its perceived intent to exploit the Arab uprisings to weaken the Gulf states. Sectarian tensions have escalated throughout the Gulf since 2011 as officials have sought to conflate legitimate Shia political demands with allegations of external manipulation. Thus, a closer security-focused GCC would send a clear message to Teheran after provocative recent gestures, such

as President Ahmedinejad's visit to the occupied UAE island of Abu Musa in the Strait of Hormuz in April 2012.

However, the unpalatable truth facing policymakers in the Gulf and their international security partners is that rising domestic pressures will constitute the greatest challenge to regional security in the medium and longer term. Politically sensitive decisions to strip away the layers of subsidies and vested interests, and to transition from a comparative advantage in hydrocarbons

to a competitive advantage based on social and human capital are lacking. Instead, a security crackdown in all Gulf states has stigmatised advocates of political reform and human rights as dangerous and destabilising elements, often with an alleged foreign agenda. As participatory pressures intensify and the welfare handouts announced in 2011 fail to quell calls for reform, the Gulf states will become more introspective. Only then will a GCC union become possible, as rulers may close ranks against the demands of their populace.

