



The growing instability of Gulf and Middle East security

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SINCE the creation of Israel in 1948, the epicentre of security in the Middle East had traditionally been located between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbours. The popular unrests and revolt that spread throughout the Middle East as a consequence of the Arab Spring in 2011 have completely reshuffled the security dynamic in the region. The Arab Gulf states have emerged as influential shapers of Middle East security and stability. The region has embarked on a path of heightened instability that transcends the traditional lines of fracture between Israel and Iran. It now comprises a major rift between the Gulf monarchies and Iran, as well as among the Gulf states.

The year 1979 represented a watershed in Middle East security for two reasons. First, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union gave birth to the global jihadist movement originally embodied in Al Qaeda and then more recently by the "Islamist State in Iraq and the Levant" (ISIS). Second, the Islamist revolution in Iran that removed the Shah and established a clerical Islamist regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini unleashed a series of power re-configurations that still resonate today.

Immediately after the regime change in Iran, Iraq launched a pre-emptive strike against Tehran that would unleash a bloody eight-year conflict. Faced with the Iranian threat, the Arab Gulf states, spear-headed by Saudi Arabia, created a political alliance, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The Americans supported its Gulf allies' initiative by providing firmer security guarantees through the Carter doctrine and the establishment of the US Central Command in 1983. By the end of the 1980s, the structure of the regional balance of power system was firmly anchored in a tripolar system comprising Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 would initiate the disintegration of this tripolar system. The direct consequence of the Gulf War was that the Americans were physically drawn in the Gulf region. First, they sent troop contingents and aircrafts to Prince Sultan airbase in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield in 1990. Once the Gulf War ended, the base was used to conduct a double containment policy supported by sanctions towards both Iraq and Iran in the 1990s.¹ In 1995, the Americans reactivated the Fifth Fleet and headquartered it in Manama, Bahrain. By the end of the 1990s, Gulf security was characterised by the increasing involvement of the United States in the region and by the freezing of the regional tripolar balance of power.

The invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 would represent a dramatic turning point in the regional polarity. Through an active deBaathification program initiated by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the subsequent parliamentary elections, the Shia majority took control of the country.² By 2006, not only had Iraq been wiped out as a regional power but the first elected Prime Minister after Saddam Hussein, Nouri al-Maliki, would conduct a policy that brought Iraq closer to Iran. This led King Abdullah to say about al-Maliki "I don't trust this man, he's an Iranian agent." Maliki has "opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq" since taking power.³ The tripolar regional

balance of power had shifted to a bipolar system. As the Cold War demonstrated, bipolar systems are prone to arms races. The last decade would prove this assertion to be correct again.

When the 26-year old Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself after his street cart had been confiscated by the police on 17 December 2010, his suicide amplified by social media resonated across the entire Arab world. Corrupt Arab regimes and governments fell one after the other. Viewed from the Arab Gulf states' capitals, this wave of popular unrest was perceived as a direct threat to the stability of their regimes. At the invitation of Bahrain's ruling family Al Khalifa, Saudi Arabia and UAE intervened to help the Sunni regime to suppress Shia uprisings in Bahrain in March 2011. This was the first time that the GCC resorted to a collective military operation in one of its member states.⁴ At the same time, the UAE and Qatar participated in NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya that led to the removal of its leader, Colonel Gaddafi, from power. The UAE and Qatar also intervened individually on the ground but supported opposing sides.⁵ Qatar along with Turkey supported the Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood while the UAE, together with Russia and Egypt backed the forces of General Khalifa Haftar who fought Islamist militants in the Eastern part of the country.⁶

Doha and Abu Dhabi have espoused two different types of foreign policies.⁷ The UAE has conducted a staunchly anti-Islamist foreign policy aimed at countering the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) since 1994, but even more so after the Arab Spring. The Brotherhood seeks to establish a global Islamic state⁸ by political means and this implies "toppling those Muslim governments that are not Brotherhood-ruled in the long run."⁹ Abu Dhabi has therefore been concerned about the destabilisation potential of the *Ikhwan*, especially in the UAE's poorest emirates, where the local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, known as *al-Islah*, have maintained a support base for decades notably through

the state's educational institutions. One of the first measures Abu Dhabi took immediately following the start of the Arab Spring was a crackdown on UAE based *Islah* members.

In the early 1960s, many *Ikhwan* scholars and clerics, the most famous being Yusuf al-Qaradawi, left Egypt for Qatar and occupied important positions, notably in education. The Muslim Brotherhood did not represent a threat to Qatar, which is composed of a small native population with "a strong ruler-ruled socio-political bargain."¹⁰ Moreover, in return for its lenient position towards the *Ikhwan*, the movement focused its activities outside Qatar and closed its local branch in 1999. The *Ikhwan* also provided Doha with a tool of influence. Indeed, although Qatar is a Wahhabi country, its open-door policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood contributed to augment its regional influence as *Ikhwan* ideology is more widespread than Wahhabism originating from Saudi Arabia. During the Arab Spring, Doha played that card by supporting the *Ikhwan* affiliates notably in Egypt and Tunisia. The Doha based TV channel, Al Jazeera, was also accused of actively supporting the Islamists in Egypt. When Mohamed Mursi came to power in June 2012, Doha reinforced his power through financial assistance.

With such opposing perspectives, Doha and Abu Dhabi were on a collision course. In January 2013, the UAE arrested *Islah* members and from July 2013 Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in his crackdown of the *Ikhwan* after he had overthrown Mursi. This only strengthened the Muslim Brotherhood's criticism of the UAE and on 31 January 2014, Qaradawi, during a Friday sermon broadcasted on Qatar television, criticised and described the UAE as "being against Islam."¹¹

In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha and accused the small emirate of violating the GCC's principle of non-interference in its members' domestic affairs. This principle, together with the

non-support to the *Ikhwan*, had apparently been agreed upon at a meeting in Riyadh on 23 November 2013. Faced with the prospect of an internal implosion of the GCC, King Abdullah put pressure to end the crisis. The Riyadh Declaration, which has never officially been made public, was signed on 16 November 2014.¹² It reaffirmed the November 2013 agreement and added a commitment to support Egypt. Following this agreement, some members of the Muslim Brotherhood left Doha, and Qaradawi stopped his criticisms of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

After King Abdullah's death in January 2015, King Salman became the new ruler of Saudi Arabia, and appointed his young son (29), Mohamed bin Salman (MBS), as defence minister. This change of leadership would mark a turning point in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which would seek, by any means, to counter Iran's expansion in the region. Riyadh found a strong ally in the de facto ruler of the UAE, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed.

When Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, announced the need for a pivot to Asia-Pacific in October 2011,¹³ cracks in the US-Gulf Arab states relations began to appear. The abandonment of Mubarak by Washington and the failure to enforce the red line that Obama had announced on 20 August 2012¹⁴ – after Assad's forces had used chemical weapons in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus in August 2013 – contributed to the Arab Gulf states' loss of confidence in their historical alliance with Washington.¹⁵ Some argue that Obama's change of position was due to USA's secret negotiations with Iran to get a nuclear agreement in March 2013.¹⁶ Obama did not want to jeopardise a deal with Iran and backed down.¹⁷ The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1 and Iran on 14 July 2015 was a shock to the Gulf monarchies and considered an act of treason.

The JCPOA agreement was considered by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as further reinforcing Tehran's influence in the region. From their perspective, Iran was encircling them with its Hezbollah ally in Lebanon;

with its military and Shia paramilitary contributions in Syria to support Assad; through a benevolent Shia government in Iraq, and with their alliance with the Houthis in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, through its young defence minister, embarked on a very active policy of countering Iran. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, in alliance with the UAE, intervened in Yemen. In December 2015, Riyadh announced the creation of a Sunni military alliance to counter terrorism, excluding Iraq and Syria considered as allies of Tehran. On 3 January 2016, Saudi Arabia cut its diplomatic ties with Iran after its Tehran embassy had been stormed by individuals protesting against the execution of the prominent Shiite cleric Nimr al Nimr in Saudi Arabia.

When President Trump came to power in January 2017, the Gulf states were unsure about the direction that US foreign policy would take, as candidate Trump during the election campaigns had harsh words towards both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and expressed the opinion that America's allies should pay for its contribution to their security. Yet, Trump the businessman did not vanish when he became president. President Trump's first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia was unprecedented, and was conditional on signing major business deals with the USA. More than \$380 billion of which \$110 billion in arms deals were signed.¹⁸ Beyond the commercial impact, the main message that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi got from the new American President was that they had a green light to crack down on terrorism in the Middle East. The two capitals, together with Egypt and Bahrain, used this to settle unfinished business with Qatar by imposing a blockade on the tiny emirate, still suspected to support the Muslim Brotherhood. They also issued, publicly this time, thirteen non-negotiable demands on Qatar, which included the closure of Al Jazeera and the severance of Doha's relations with Iran.¹⁹ The uncompromising demands left no room for negotiations, but Qatar did not back down (*see the article of Sebastian Sons in this Bulletin*). Doha reached out to Turkey and Iran to diversify its supply lines.

In June 2017, Mohamed bin Salman was appointed crown prince taking de facto control of its predecessor's, Mohamed bin Nayef, Ministry of Interior. In November, he launched a massive anticorruption campaign where the head of the National Guard, Prince Mutaib was arrested. MbS has become Saudi Arabia's strongman. Beyond punishing Qatar for its foreign policy, Mohamed bin Salman's main goal is to confront Iran.²⁰ The de facto victory of Assad in Syria had rung alarm bells in Riyadh. MbS has used every tool at his disposal to confront Tehran, from direct intervention such as in Yemen, indirect in Syria; pressuring Tehran's alleged allies as with the resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Saad Hariri from Riyadh,²¹ the Qatari blockade, as well as through an alliance with the traditional arch enemy of the Arabs, Israel.²²

Middle East security is now profoundly shaped by Gulf security dynamics. The traditional tripolar regional system was destroyed by the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. This opened up a direct struggle for power and regional influence between Iran and an increasingly more assertive Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring added an internal struggle for power within the GCC countries between Doha and Abu Dhabi, later joined by Riyadh, creating multiple lines of conflicts and instability within the Gulf and beyond. The consequences of Iran-Saudi rivalry extend to the entire Middle East and represent a major factor of concern for the future of the region, as both Riyadh and Tehran are on a military shopping spree.

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