

The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution

by Mehran Kamrava

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Abstract: The author contends that the Arab Spring has provided an opening for the Gulf Cooperation Council as a group and for Saudi Arabia as a long-time aspiring leader of the Arab world to try to expand their regional influence and global profile. An already weakened Arab state system, he argues, has been once again weakened by the sweeping wave of rebellion.

With its final chapter yet to be written, the Arab Spring of 2011 is likely to go down in history as a season of profound political changes that swept across the *domestic* politics of the Arab world. Even at this preliminary stage, that much is clear. What remains unclear, however, is how political change sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa is likely to alter the international relations of the Arab world in general and, in particular, the larger regional position and specific policy preferences of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Important considerations include the GCC's posture and profile vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, its collective reaction to the region-wide movements for political change, and its delicate relationship with its two troubled neighbors to the north, namely Iran and Iraq.

While the Arab Spring is unlikely to result in meaningful changes in Iran and Iraq's relationships with the GCC, it has fostered two discernible trends in the larger Arab world. First, Saudi Arabia has sought to reassert its position of prominence and leadership within the GCC. In fact, the kingdom has positioned itself as the chief architect of a counterrevolution to contain, and perhaps to even reverse, the Arab Spring as much as possible. Second, and an outgrowth of the first development, is the GCC's attempt to solidify its identity and mandate through the inclusion of additional Sunni monarchies—Morocco and Jordan—as a counterbalance, if not a substitute, to the Arab League.

The GCC Reaction to the Arab Spring

The overriding concern of the GCC states has been to contain the Arab Spring both within the borders of its own member states and, whenever possible, across the Arab world. Long preoccupied with regime security in both domestic and foreign policy pursuits,¹ the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf find the Arab Spring a cause for real and immediate concern. The rulers of these countries see these uprisings as their most serious crises since the Iranian revolution threw the region into chaos in the early 1980s. Their response has been two-fold: addressing the crisis internally, through a combination of heightened repression and additional economic incentives; and, regionally, shoring up alliances and bolstering otherwise faltering states.

Domestically, across the GCC an authoritarian retrenchment and narrowing of political space has emerged. This reassertion of the state's dictatorial authority has, of course, taken different forms across the region depending on the state's overall societal posture. In Qatar, for example, where anti-state sentiments are conspicuous in their absence, there have not been any discernible changes in the domestic political environment. In the United Arab Emirates, however, the space provided to civil society organizations has been steadily narrowed by the state since the beginning of the regional unrests including a few high-profile detentions.² Abu Dhabi's ruling Al-Nahyans are reported to have hired a foreign mercenary army to ensure their hold on power should the need arise.³ In Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, the same state that once looked the other way when women flouted the law by getting behind the steering wheels, now hands out severe jail sentences to innocuous challenges to the prevailing orthodoxy.⁴ At the opposite extreme from Qatar is Bahrain, where the state's reaction to opposition, most of it by the country's Shia majority, has been brutal and uncompromising.⁵

At the same time as GCC states have resorted to heightened levels of repression to ensure their political survival, they have also sought to strengthen their rule by pumping massive amounts of money into the economy. Across the Middle East, authoritarian states have historically maintained their power through a combination of promising to provide for national security, spreading fear and intimidation, and promising economic progress.⁶

¹ Gregory Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.

² Mark Tran. "Arab uprisings: Roundup," *The Guardian* April 11, 2011, p. 16.

³ Giles Whittell. "US Mercenary Forms Force for Prince," *Times* (London) (May 16, 2011), p. 27.

⁴ Neil MacFarquhar. "Saudi Woman Arrested for Driving," *International Herald Tribune* (May 25, 2011), p. 6.

⁵ Nicholas Kristof. "Bahrain Pulls a Qaddafi," *International Herald Tribune* (March 18, 2011), p. 7.

⁶ Mehran Kamrava. *The Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), p. 356.

With the Arab Spring in the background for much of the GCC, and very much in the foreground in Bahrain, moves to placate through economic concessions have been afoot in Kuwait, Bahrain, and especially Saudi Arabia. Beginning in February 2011, before troubling protests broke out in several cities in the kingdom's predominantly Shia Eastern Province, the Saudi state began spending \$130 billion to pump up civil servant salaries (paying two extra months' salaries), promising to build 500,000 additional units of low-income housing, and substantially increasing its financial support for religious organizations.⁷

In Kuwait, at around the same time, the state increased civil servant salaries by 115 percent at a cost of more than \$1 billion, and at an additional cost of \$5 billion, gave a cash handout of Kuwaiti Dinar (KD) 1000 to its citizens and promised free distribution of foodstuffs for fourteen months.⁸ For similar reasons, the GCC promised \$20 billion for purposes of sponsoring ten-year development projects in its two less prosperous—and politically more troubled—member states, Oman and Bahrain.⁹ Operating under a similar assumption that financial strength might save the Mubarak regime from its impending collapse, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah is reported to have threatened to underwrite President Mubarak's administration if the United States withdrew its support from its long-time ally.¹⁰

The Arab Spring has also brought significant changes to the GCC states' collective foreign relations. Perhaps one of the most important of these changes has been a reassertion of Saudi leadership within the GCC when upstarts Qatar and the UAE have consistently challenged Saudi preeminence within the Arabian Peninsula.¹¹ Saudi Arabia has long ascribed to itself the role of a "regional coordinator" and an intra-Arab consensus-builder through a proactive diplomacy.¹² The Arab Spring has given this diplomatic activism a new sense of urgency, driven primarily from two related realizations, one related to U.S. foreign policy and the other to domestic Saudi politics. First, with the United States voicing concern over human rights violations in Bahrain and elsewhere—half-hearted as they may be¹³—the Saudis appear to have decided that their traditional American allies cannot be fully counted on.

⁷ Neil MacFarquhar. "Saudi Cash is the Key to Quiet in the Kingdom," *The International Herald Tribune* (June 10, 2011), p. 4.

⁸ "Inside the coddled kingdom". *The Toronto Star*, February 17, 2011, p. 10.

⁹ "Gulf Cooperation Council sets up 20 bn-dollar fund for Bahrain, Oman projects". Saudi Press Agency (March 11, 2011).

¹⁰ Hugh Tomlinson. *The Times* (London), February 10, 2011, p. 1.

¹¹ Sean Foley. "The UAE: Political Issues and Security Dilemmas," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*. March 1999, p. 32.

¹² Joseph Kostiner. "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: The Fluctuation of Regional Coordination," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, December 2009, p. 417.

¹³ Mark Lander. "Amid unrest in Bahrain, U.S. tends a friendship," *International Herald Tribune*, June 11, 2011, p. 5.

Second, allowing events to unfold unchecked runs the risk of courting trouble at home. Complacency, the Saudis seem to have determined, is not an option. Thus, mistrust of American resolve to support “moderate” allies, coupled with fears of Arab Spring contagion, have given Saudi regional diplomacy an added urgency. In pursuing their proactive diplomacy with zeal, the Saudis have rediscovered the instrumentalist utility of the GCC.

The reassertion of Saudi leadership within the GCC has taken different forms. First, although by sending troops to help prop up its Bahraini ally King Hamad Al-Khalifa, Saudi Arabia has widened the region’s sectarian divide between the Sunni and the Shia. This move signaled to the other GCC states Saudi determination to take the lead in preventing the Arab Spring’s disruptive ripple effects from reaching the Arabian Peninsula. “Saudi Arabia,” declared a reporter in *The Times* of London, “is using its influence, money and force to stamp out regional fires.”¹⁴

Going far beyond the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia took the lead in spearheading what is by all accounts a region-wide “counter-revolution”: it gave Egypt \$4 billion to shore up the fledgling post-Mubarak order, and to prevent its further radicalization, and it proposed that the GCC be expanded to include Jordan and Morocco, while seeking to keep its hands involved in Yemen’s perilous, fluid politics.¹⁵

Part of this newly crafted re-assertive leadership by Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain, has been their joint denouncement of Iran as the primary culprit for Bahrain’s troubles. In its April 2011 meeting held in Riyadh, the GCC, at Saudi instigation, called on “the international community and the Security Council to take the necessary measures to stop flagrant Iranian interference and provocations aimed at sowing discord and destruction” among GCC states. Condemning what it called Iranian “aggression” against Saudi diplomats in Tehran, the group maintained that it “categorically rejects all foreign interference in its affairs... and invites the Iranian regime to stop its provocations.”¹⁶

The GCC and the Question of Arab Unity

A renewed emphasis on Arab unity under the auspices of existing political establishments has risen, with the apparent assumption that a reinvigorated alliance of the Arab states would enhance their domestic survivability and perhaps even popular legitimacy. But the Saudis appear concerned that the fractious Arab world is too ideologically and diplomatically disparate and,

¹⁴ Richard Beeston. “World Fallout from Fukushima and Arab Spring may change politics of Middle East and Far East,” *The Times* (London), April 4, 2011, p. 3.

¹⁵ Neil MacFarquhar. “Saudis Scramble in Bid to Contain Regional Unrest,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2011, p. 1.

¹⁶ “GCC urges UN to halt ‘interference’ by Iran,” *Khaleej Times* (Dubai), April 18, 2011.

thus, unreliable. Sources of concern to the Saudis are the closeness to Iran of Iraq, under the leadership of the Shia Prime Minister Maliki, and the moves of Egypt's post-Mubarak leaders to improve the country's relations with Iran and their overtures to Hamas.¹⁷

These concerns appear to have been largely responsible for the GCC's successful efforts to cancel the May 2011 Arab League summit in Baghdad, postponing it to 2012.¹⁸ At the same time, the Saudi proposal to expand the GCC to include Morocco and Jordan, the Arab world's only two other monarchies outside of the Arabian Peninsula, appears designed to transform the GCC into a more cohesive, politically dependable alternative to the Arab League. Tellingly, Jordan had first applied for GCC membership in the 1980s but was rebuked. By 2011, the geopolitics of the region had changed sufficiently to merit its inclusion in the group.

It is here that the greatest significance of the Arab Spring to the GCC seems to lie. The veracity of the claim that "Arab unity is dead" is as misplaced as is a belief in Arab unity's strength and vibrancy. Arab unity is neither dead nor is it completely alive and well. Sharing a common lingo-religious tradition, in modern times Arab unity has been resurrected by stress to the Arab system, formerly exerted by European colonialism and later by Israeli pressure. That resurrection of unity was led by whoever shouted the loudest and carried the biggest stick. For much of the latter half of the twentieth century that role fell to Egypt. As enemies fluctuated, and as Egypt made peace with the Israeli enemy, Arab unity experienced parallel ebbs and flows. The once "focused system" of the Arab world, predominant in the 1950s and the 1960s, failed to coalesce into a similarly united coalition four to five decades later. In fact, by 2011, the Arab armies had faced each other on the battlefield on at least two occasions.¹⁹

Arab states are once again under stress, so much so that some already broke under pressure (Tunisia and Egypt), others are teetering on the edge (post-Qaddafi Libya and Yemen), and still others are just barely hanging on through barbaric crackdown (Bahrain and Syria). Under the circumstances, the only "system" that remains, and that has emerged as the transnational unifying force of the GCC, is the monarchical system. Saudi Arabia's proposed expansion of the GCC to encompass the two remaining monarchies of the Arab world, and its own ascendance within the GCC, signal the desert kingdom's larger ascendance within the wider Arab world and, by extension, across most of the Middle East.

To sum up, the stress of the Arab Spring has reignited the need for unity, this time under the auspices not of the fractious and divided Arab

¹⁷ MacFarquhar. "Saudis Scramble in Bid to Contain Regional Unrest," p. 1.

¹⁸ "Arab League hopeful Gulf states to reconsider bid to cancel summit," *BBC Monitoring Service*, April 14, 2011.

¹⁹ This occurred during the liberation of Kuwait and NATO's war on Muammar Qaddafi, in which Qatar and the UAE took part.

League, but under the rubric of the GCC. Within the GCC, Saudi Arabia's counter-revolutionary leadership has enhanced its role and is slowly pushing it into the position of prominence that it assumes it rightly deserves.

How lasting is this?

Not very lasting, it seems. And, as with so many of the other developments in the Middle East and the Arab world in recent years, it appears that Iran and Iraq are somehow involved.

The Arab Spring and GCC's Relations with Iran and Iraq

In the long run, the Arab Spring is unlikely to usher in significant changes to the fundamentals of GCC–Iran relations. Pragmatism, which is the guiding principle of the GCC states' foreign policies, both collectively and individually, is the primary reason for this continuity in GCC–Iran relations despite the eruption of the Arab Spring. As the underlying premise of GCC foreign policies, survival strategies require an innate pragmatism that mitigates the pursuit of exclusivist objectives. At some level, all GCC states need to resort to omnibalancing between Iran and its regional security and political ambitions on the one hand, and their own and the United States' interests on the other.²⁰ At the end of the day, atmospherics and diplomatic posturing notwithstanding, pragmatism rules the day in the GCC—a pragmatism translated into a calibrated mixture of superficial cooperation and watchfulness.

Certain variations in bilateral relations exist between Iran and its Persian Gulf neighbors to the south. Oman, for example, has consistently maintained friendly relations with Tehran, even during the tense days of the revolution and the Islamic Republic's war with Iraq.²¹ Qatari–Iranian relations have been similarly warm and cordial.²² But these relationships remain only skin-deep. They are rooted more in brotherly declarations and summitry rather than military and security cooperation, joint venture projects, or even meaningful trade and investment. At one level, GCC–Iran relations range from friction over disputed islands (UAE and Iran) to frequent state visits and grand declarations. At a more substantive level, there is a wary consistency of the revolutionary Shia giant to the north with its seemingly endless supply of

²⁰ According to Steven David, omnibalancing “incorporates the need of leaders to appease secondary adversaries, as well as to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive in power.” Steven R. David. “Explaining Third World Alignment,” *World Politics*, January 1991, p. 236. See also, Gerd Nonneman. “Analyzing the Foreign Policies of the Middle East and North Africa: A Conceptual Framework,” *The Review of International Affairs* (Winter 2003, p. 124).

²¹ Marc J. O'Reilly. “Omanibalancing: Oman Confronts an Uncertain Future,” *The Middle East Journal*, Winter 1998, p. 75.

²² Gawdat Bahgat. “Security in the Persian Gulf: Perils and Opportunities,” *Contemporary Security Policy*. August 2008, p. 318.

radical, undiplomatic leaders. But the Arab Spring is not likely to change perceptions or substance in Persian Gulf relationships.

When the dust of the on-going spring cleaning is settled, GCC–Iran relations most likely will continue to exhibit many of their current features: a mixture of suspicion and cooperation; maintenance of superficial “fraternal” ties combined with a wary eye; and hopes for the continuation of Iran’s *managed* tensions with the United States.

It is far too early to predict the likely changes in the current foreign policy orientations among individual Arab countries arising out of the on-going political changes. But even wholesale regime changes in Libya and elsewhere are unlikely to drastically alter prevailing foreign policy orientations. The new rulers of Egypt and Tunisia, and certainly Libya—whose fight against Qaddafi owed much to financial and military assistance from Qatar and the UAE—are keenly aware of their continued indebtedness to the Persian Gulf’s conservative monarchies. As one observer has recently commented,

Egypt’s new leaders have inherited Mubarak’s dilemma—how to realize the country’s aspiration to lead the Arab world without angering its Saudi benefactors. For this reason, the Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement will yield more photo opportunities than tangible results. On opposite sides of religious and ethnic divides, a close bilateral relationship would seem unlikely under even the best circumstances. And, with Egypt in need of massive financial aid to offset the economic losses caused by its February revolution, its leaders can ill afford to alienate the Saudis, who view Iran, not Israel, as the gravest threat to regional stability.²³

The Arab Spring, in sum, is likely to bring Iran neither closer to nor further from the GCC. Even the possible loss of its Syrian ally, while perhaps consequential in relation to Lebanon, is unlikely to substantially alter the Islamic Republic’s relations with its immediate neighbors to the south.

A similar continuation of the status quo is likely to mark the GCC’s relations with Iraq in the aftermath of the Arab Spring—at least in as much as there is a status quo in Iraq’s fluid political environment. For some time now, the Sunni monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula have apprehensively watched the political ascendance of the Shia in Iraq, and Iraq’s attendant steadily friendlier relations with Iran. With Bahrain’s aborted rebellion increasingly couched in sectarian terms by the kingdom’s leaders, both Iraq as well as Iran were officially portrayed as responsible for the upheavals.²⁴ The Saudis, and by extension the Bahrainis, whose foreign policy is frequently closely aligned with that of their much larger neighbor, view Iraq’s Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki with deep suspicion because of his close ties to Iran. Maliki’s criticism in March 2011 of the Saudi intervention in Bahrain did not endear him to either of

²³ Barak Barfi. “How New is Egypt’s ‘New’ Foreign Policy?” <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/barfi4/English>. Accessed on June 14, 2011.

²⁴ Patrick Cockburn. “Violence and sackings ‘used to force Shia out’ of Sunni kingdom,” *The Independent* (London), May 20, 2011, p. 2.

the two kingdoms,²⁵ prompting them to successfully press for the postponement of the May 2011 Arab League summit meeting. The 2011 worsening of relations between Iraq and the GCC, especially with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, is likely to give way in the future to more pragmatic approaches of nuanced cooperation and suspicion. Just as the GCC states prefer the continuation of managed tensions between Iran and the United States, such concerns keep the Islamic Republic too preoccupied with its security to cause mischief in the Arabian Peninsula, preferring a weak Iraq that will not reassert itself in the same way as in the 1980s and the early 1990s. As much as possible, the GCC would like to draw Iraq farther from the Iranian orbit. This does not extend, however, to going so far as to bring Iraq within the GCC fold; the country's ethno-sectarian make-up, with a majority being Shia, make the GCC's northward expansion far too risky for any of the conservative monarchies to the south to undertake. If the Arab Spring has done anything to GCC–Iraq relations it is to make the sheikhdoms all the more conservative in their assumptions about and their approach to the northerly Shia. For the foreseeable future, the GCC's uneasy relationship with Iraq and Iran is likely to continue unchanged.

Conclusion

All the various GCC states resort to omnibalancing to ensure that they account for both domestic as well as outside pressures in crafting their foreign policies. This serves as a natural inducement to pursue more pragmatic policies that are likely to enhance regime security as opposed to overtly doctrinal or one-sided ones that may arouse domestic or regional tensions. Despite deep-seated suspicions about both Iran and Iraq, GCC states, both collectively and individually, have pursued largely pragmatic policies toward their northern neighbors. The Arab Spring is unlikely to change the underlying premises of these relationships.

Nonetheless, the Arab Spring has provided an opening for the GCC as a group and for Saudi Arabia as a long-time aspiring leader of the Arab world to try to expand their regional influence and global profile. An already weakened Arab state system, with a gradually rehabilitated Egypt under Mubarak's leadership, has been once again weakened by the sweeping wave of rebellion. Saudi Arabia sought to seize the initiative, by not only containing the rebellion close to its shores in Bahrain but by also leading a region-wide counter-revolution. The kingdom's extension of \$4 billion to Egypt to shore up the post-Mubarak state was part of a calculated strategy to buy influence and ensure prominence.

²⁵ "Iraqi PM criticizes Saudi, Bahrain, Libya handling of protesters," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*. March 20, 2011; Iraqi PM, Al-Sistani condemn foreign interference, violence in Bahrain. *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*. March 16, 2011.

The extent to which this strategy is likely to succeed in the long term remains to be seen. Neither history nor current trends, however, seem to be on the side of the Saudi drive for regional supremacy. Upstart Qatar and perhaps also the UAE—specifically Abu Dhabi—are unlikely to be content to let Saudi Arabia take a GCC leadership role in regional affairs, especially once the dust of the Arab Spring is settled. Already, the two smaller sheikhdoms' involvement in the Libyan civil war on the side of the rebels, and their investments in Tunisia and Egypt, signal their intentions to remain very much involved in the political economy of North Africa. Similarly, Oman is unlikely to fundamentally reorient its doggedly independent foreign policy toward Saudi preferences, even though the GCC promised the sultanate \$10 billion over ten years. Other challenges to Saudi prominence are likely to come from outside of the GCC, with Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and perhaps even a post-Assad Syria as the most likely competitors. The days of Nasser, when the mantle of the Palestinian cause united most of the Middle East, are long gone. Even then meaningful and complete Arab unity evaded Egypt's charismatic leader. The Arab Spring may have provided Saudi Arabia with a window to advance its leadership aspirations within the Arab world. But there is no reason to believe that this window of opportunity is any more lasting than previous ones.

