



The GCC at 35: Regional Concerns and Strategic Hedging

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Last week, the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) concluded its 37th summit meeting in Manama, Bahrain, amid many hopeful pronouncements as well as attendant concerns. In their final communique, GCC leaders reasserted their long-held hopes to further cooperation efforts in the political and strategic realms, economic development, and the weaving of a common social infrastructure. What again was prominent in the post-summit document was the repeated denunciations of furtive Iranian actions around the Gulf and the region and a call to the international community to do what it must to check the Islamic Republic's destabilizing activities.

In a clear sign of the times, the GCC summit also featured the enthusiastic and welcome participation of British Prime Minister Theresa May in its deliberations. Her presence came at the sunset of an Obama administration that has stymied GCC leaders' urgent calls for more American involvement in the Middle East and the dawn of a so-far-directionless Trump administration. It also indicated the beginning of a period of strategic hedging that could mollify the GCC's trepidations and ameliorate the United Kingdom's current doubts about the dreaded Brexit, which its populist wave initiated.

Inter- and Intra-GCC Concerns

GCC leaders met at a crucial time in the drive for more unified, if not fully united, action. Nothing tangible seems to have transpired thus far from the call for a Gulf union by the late Saudi Arabian monarch, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. And except for the enthusiastic advocacy mostly from Riyadh and Manama, the call has lingered between the outright rejection of the Sultanate of Oman and the dutiful positive pronouncements about the benefits of cooperation from the other three states (Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates). As time and developments pressure the council at this critical juncture of its integrative project, GCC leaders are thus oscillating between the necessary compromises for a supra-national entente and the almost inescapable and latent proclivities of national elites reluctant to relinquish localized interests.

On the other hand, GCC leaders remain cognizant of the necessity for closer confederalism, which presently is the best guarantee for the survival of their strong and resilient state systems. If the latest summit showed anything, it was that the tribulations of the regional environment will continue to prompt them to seek commonalities and common interests. With political union out of reach for the time being, work can surely advance on other fronts such as further cooperation on developing a stronger economic base, akin to the achievements of the postwar European Steel and

Coal Community. They can also continue discussions on the common currency that will surely help the development of their common market, itself anticipating a region-wide railroad system, a customs union, and fully mobile national and migrant labor. The GCC can also devise a unified financial and investment environment that could functionally prepare the groundwork for more political integration.

In a sense, GCC leaders must recognize that what has already been achieved is no small measure, but it does not represent all that they can accomplish, given their capabilities and the common threats facing them. Certainly, the political and security milieu in which they live and with which they interact necessitates some bold actions to lessen the concerns about ceding some national sovereignty; at the same time, such actions could also increase the possibilities of cross-national cooperation and integration.

Perhaps now is the time to show extreme urgency for fuller economic cooperation and coordination. All GCC states—except for Kuwait, which chose a slower program of change—are in the throes of restructuring their rentier economies and revising their social contract. From lessening the over-reliance on their hydrocarbon resources to launching full-throttled diversification efforts, GCC states have an opportunity to pool their energies and plans which, if collectively implemented, will be longer lasting. What has already been attempted over the last few years can be used as a litmus test for what works, with obvious due consideration to capabilities and endowment. Indeed, what worked for Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Muscat, or Doha may need to be tailored to Manama, Kuwait City, or Riyadh. The general blueprint for pan-GCC reforms and changes can truly transform the alliance into the powerhouse it can be beyond its current position in international economics.

GCC states must also come to terms with their different outlooks regarding regional states and forces. What to Oman may appear a rather benevolent Iranian foreign policy is seen in Saudi Arabia as buoyant, strident, and maleficent. Similarly, one finds an activist Emirati position in support of a repressive Egyptian regime that shares with Abu Dhabi an abhorrence of the Muslim Brotherhood; at the same time, many of the organization's leaders reside in Doha, a fact that should be understood for what it is: a wedge issue that prevents unified action. More intimately, and despite positive developments since late 2014, the sensitivities between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, on the other, strike at the root of cooperation and invite unwanted doubt. For the GCC to chart a hopeful journey into the future, these and other issues related to latent sentiments about borders, equal footing in collective decision making, and a more robust military structure must be resolved.

Regional Painful Thorns in the Side

What should act as an exogenous regional concern that threatens potential unification is the bleeding Yemeni civil war. It has become abundantly clear that Yemen—represented as an active conflict, an attendant political stalemate, and a current haven for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and elements of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—will continue to sap GCC energies and resources if no acceptable compromise is reached between the different factions. And let there be no illusion that it is possible to see Yemen as only a Saudi Arabian or Omani concern; in fact, the geographical context of the Arabian Peninsula makes this perception untenable. Neither should it be assumed that it is merely a military conflict awaiting one faction's defeat of another. Instead, Yemen is a political, economic, social, and humanitarian disaster for which the responsibility rests in large part on the shoulders of the GCC's power centers. Importantly, it will continue to invite instability and interference, especially from Iran, to the detriment of cross-border GCC interests. The situation in Yemen thus should propel GCC leaders toward more coordination and cooperation; indeed, diminished attention to Yemen could result in a continuation of this protracted and destructive conflict, the dissolution of the once-unified state, or the strengthening of AQAP and ISIS. (The latter again reminded everyone on December 10 of the gravity of its regional threat when ISIS forces killed over 40 soldiers in an attack on a military base in Aden.)

Neither can the GCC avoid the developments in Iraq and Syria, where the fight against ISIS's millennial terrorism adjoins a fateful confrontation with Iran as a hegemonic challenger. There, the countries of the GCC cannot escape an existential battle against a strain of Islam that is a threat to them and the entire Muslim world, before it is a menace to its professed apostate enemies in the West. The GCC's deep concern about the revival of AQAP in Yemen is only matched by anxiety about the survival of ISIS—not only as a military threat but also as a cancer striking strong and resilient roots across Muslim communities in the Arab world. That GCC countries enthusiastically joined the American-led anti-ISIS coalition was not merely a political gesture toward the international community but a specific and responsible response to the demands of defending and preserving the decency of Islam.

Concomitantly with such trepidation, what the GCC states also see is the wanton assault by an ever-strident Iran pursuing a sectarian-based political and strategic hegemony in the Arab Levant. Their worries are exacerbated by the hundreds of thousands of Shiite militiamen, supported and financed by the Islamic Republic, who are forcing themselves onto the battlefields of Iraq and Syria in a bid to assure a contiguous geographic expansion from Tehran to the Mediterranean coast. In the process, Iran would be depriving the GCC of its hinterland and, in reality, circumscribing it within the confines of the peninsula. In addition to the marginalization of the GCC, the leaders of the council are witnessing the merciless subjugation of a large Sunni community whose ancestry

hails from the peninsula and whose progeny is being killed and made homeless and destitute by the millions.

As the sectarian nature of Iranian expansionism becomes more obvious in Iraq and Syria—as it is in Lebanon and Yemen—the GCC is hard-pressed to respond effectively, thus falling into the trap of fomenting the Sunni-Shiite divide by proxy. In fact, the GCC has already been cornered into the confines of such a divide. Egged on by Iranian propaganda that Wahhabism is what spawns terrorist organizations, some western policy makers and analysts are convinced that Saudi Arabia and other states in the Gulf cannot be trusted as partners for peace in the Levant. That the extremist ideology espoused by the Iranian revolution and fed to myriad Shiite militias through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is not seen as spawning terrorist activities against the Iraqi, Syrian, Yemeni, and Lebanese peoples is as much an absolution of Iranian foreign policy practices as it is an obfuscation of fact and reality. Yet whatever the nature of the debate about the origins and ramifications of the Islamic rift, the GCC—as the only cohesive *Arab* body of capable states—cannot abandon what it and its peoples see as a just struggle for the future of the Levant as an essential geostrategic landscape.

The Attempt at Strategic Hedging

GCC states have long relied on an ironclad relationship with the United States, one that covered political and strategic issues and was helpful in addressing uneasy concerns. Ever since President Barack Obama's 2011 call for an American re-balancing to East Asia to face Chinese and North Korean challenges, however, GCC leaders have sensed a real shift in the winds of international alignment. The years since then have proven the impossibility of relying on Washington, in light of expanding Russian and Iranian ambitions and the dangers of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. To be sure, Gulf leaders have failed to persuade the Obama administration to get more involved in the region beyond what the administration itself saw it needed to do. And what they see from a Trump administration, which suffers from both incoherence and ineptitude, is not comforting given regional conditions and the steep learning curve awaiting the new president entering the White House.

Thus, the presence and reassuring stance of British Prime Minister Theresa May at the 37th summit came as a silver lining in the gray clouds darkening the skies of the Middle East. GCC leaders saw her presence as a renewal of an old relationship with which the Arabian Peninsula was comfortable for centuries and which will augur mutually beneficial returns. For its part, the United Kingdom is looking for future berths once it formalizes its divorce from the European Union. It is thus logical to surmise that, given their dissatisfaction with the level of assurance offered by the Obama administration—despite its commitment to supplying them with military security—GCC leaders

are seeing a long-awaited opportunity to practice the strategic hedging most vulnerable states pursue to ensure a more diversified system of alliances.

What can also be argued here is that while the GCC's strategic relationship with the United States will continue, May could offer the makings of an easier association for at least three reasons. First, the prime minister came to Manama as the leader of a country that is not as encumbered with international leadership and demands as the United States will continue to have for the foreseeable future. Second, the United Kingdom returns to the Gulf in possession of what GCC states presently require of the instruments of power; they see the UK as "wounded enough" and in need of a beneficial relationship with a promising market after leaving the European Union. Third, and not missing the central concern for the GCC today, Prime Minister May minced no words spelling out the dangers Iran presents to the Gulf states and their environment—in essence returning to a discourse the Obama administration has avoided in its bid to improve relations with the Islamic Republic. But whatever the reason, it is likely that a new status quo is in the making in the international alignment of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Conclusion

The Gulf Cooperation Council, in its 35th year, has come a long way since its establishment and has become an institutional answer to pressing common security, political, and economic concerns. Much has changed since 1981 that gives cheer to the leaders of the Arab states of the Gulf. Yet intra-GCC problems arising from individual state-centric preferences and differences hinder full cooperation and integration. Regional concerns also abound, and these constitute both challenges and plausible avenues for better institutional coordination. Perhaps the best scenario emerging from the 37th summit just concluded is that GCC leaders may have found a better way to protect themselves against Iran's growing interference, following Washington's vacillation about getting more deeply involved in the Middle East.