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Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Can the Six Walk Together?

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The turmoil in the Arab world and concerns over Iran's improving stature have prompted Saudi Arabia to attempt various solutions to cope more effectively with challenges at home and abroad. These efforts have included an initiative to turn the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – which also includes also Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman – into a full political union. However, tensions among the GCC members, as reflected in the recent crisis with Qatar over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and with Oman over its role in the negotiations with Iran, make it difficult to achieve the desired union. This in turn punctures the veneer of unity created by the "Arab Spring" and manifested, inter alia, in the shared opposition to Qaddafi and Assad.

At a GCC summit meeting in December 2011, Saudi King Abdullah called on the Gulf states "to move from a stage of cooperation to a stage of union in a single entity" because of the challenges at hand. Yet even without the activism of Tehran, which seeks to drive a wedge between the six, the tensions among GCC members are making it difficult to formulate a unified Gulf position. While the Gulf states see Iran's rise as a threat to their stability, they have adopted different policies toward Tehran given their differing interests and respective strategic outlooks. While over the years Saudi Arabia has preferred a more confrontational approach to Iran, Oman and Qatar have chosen to maintain normal relations with Iran.

Indeed, this policy reflects these states' need to balance between avoiding a direct confrontation with Iran and their fear of Saudi dominance. The Gulf states are concerned that Saudi Arabia is attempting to increase its influence over the small sheikdoms and force them to fall into line with Saudi foreign policy. Bahrain is the exception in this regard and tends to side with Saudi Arabia, particularly because Iran foments tension between Bahrain's Shiite majority and the Sunni royal house, but also because of historical, geographic, and familial ties with Saudi Arabia.

The establishment of the GCC in May 1981, a result of ongoing processes of cooperation, was, as defined by its charter, intended to lay the foundations for integration in all fields. The GCC was also an expression of common interests: the monarchical character of the

regimes, their religious ties as Muslims and Sunnis, their common Arab origin, and their concerns vis-à-vis revolutionary, Shiite, non-Arab Iran. It reflected attempts to find an agreed formula for Gulf security, efforts that began even before the departure of the British. In practice, however, each country pursues its own security policy, jealously guards its sovereignty, and works, almost without exception, according to its particular national interests, which hinders effective cooperation on the organizational level and meaning to the agreements in principle.

Why, then, does the idea of union remain on the agenda? Stepped-up political-security cooperation is increasingly perceived as a pressing Saudi need given the Iranian threat, the turmoil in the region, and doubts as to the US commitment to the kingdom's security. For a while, these challenges generated some coordination of strategy among several of the Gulf states and the adoption of a more assertive public position, which breathed new life into this loose alliance. Moreover, from the beginning of the turmoil in the region, the aging Saudi elite has realized that in another few years, it is liable to find itself in a different environment, with more enemies and fewer allies. In its view, the traditional methods it has used to shape its strategic environment are not sufficient, and it must end its relative passivity in order to neutralize dangers to its national security, and along with Egypt, even attempt to lead the Arab world.

There is also an old-new initiative on the agenda that apparently includes Jordanian (and possibly also Moroccan and Egyptian) soldiers in the armed forces of the Gulf states in exchange for generous monetary aid to Jordan. (The Jordanian army is considered the most professional of the Arab armies, and Jordanian solders have served in the Gulf states on various occasions in the past.) Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has not yet succeeded in promoting this or previous initiatives to unite the monarchies – such as bringing Jordan and Morocco into the GCC as full members – due to opposition from the other members, whether because of the economic burden involved or because of the possible harm to their status in the organization.

There are other issues that have remained a stumbling block in relations among the states, in particular the role of political Islam and the attitude toward the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated organizations. On March 5, 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain announced that they were recalling their ambassadors from Qatar because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which they see as a subversive organization that jeopardizes their religious legitimacy and stability (as mediators, Kuwait and Oman did not join the move). Several days later, Saudi Arabia placed the Muslim Brotherhood on its list of terrorist organizations and arrested several of its supporters. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been tense for years, because of border disputes (including a violent incident in which a number of Qatari soldiers were killed), and since Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani seized power in Qatar in 1995 and al-Jazeera was established in 1996.

At first, the parties held fast to their positions. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the new emir of Qatar, signaled that he would not change Qatar's foreign policy, while Saudi Arabia announced that the crisis would continue as long as Qatar did not change its policy, hinting at additional steps it might take against Doha. Thus even if Qatar does not radically change its "independent" foreign policy, it appears that it will ultimately be forced to retreat (tactically) from its position because of Saudi Arabia's resolve, although this retreat may be gradual manner that allows Qatar to save face. Otherwise, Qatar will find itself isolated.

It appears, then, that the sides have reached a modus vivendi that allows them to get past the most recent crisis – at least temporarily. Following a meeting of GCC foreign ministers in Riyadh last week, the members agreed not to interfere in each other's internal affairs and not to undermine one other's interests, security, or stability. A few days later, radical Muslim Brotherhood preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whose venomous sermons against Saudi Arabia and the UAE were at the heart of a crisis with Qatar, provided a written apology to the two countries, stating that his sermons (which he has suspended for a certain period of time at the instruction of the Qatari royal house) reflected his opinions only.

Yet it is not only Qatar that is making it difficult to realize a union of the six monarchies. Since the idea of full political union was proposed, the Sultanate of Oman, in uncharacteristic brazenness, has led a vigorous public opposition to the move. During the annual summit of Gulf state leaders in December 2013, the Omani foreign minister emphasized his country's opposition to a Gulf union, even threatening to withdraw from the GCC if such a decision was taken. Saudi officials were furious. Moreover, when the last GCC summit was held, Saudi Arabia was already angry at Oman because of its role in mediating between the United States and Iran behind the scenes and in jumpstarting the negotiations with Iran. Saudi Arabia even accused Oman of working behind its back and betraying it.

It would appear that the GCC is far from reaching a consensus on issues of national security, given the recent crises and certainly when they occur against the backdrop of inter-tribal competition and dormant territorial disputes. Precisely because of the challenges posed to the Gulf monarchies by the negotiations with Iran on a permanent agreement, the turmoil in the region, and the doubts concerning the US commitment to their security, it appears to be more difficult than ever for the Gulf states to present a united front. The idea of Gulf union will remain a distant vision if there is no common strategic vision, and without such a strategic vision, the union will have ceremonial value only and will certainly not lead to a fundamental change in the GCC's contribution to regional security. The recent crisis between Qatar and several of its neighbors is one of the most serious since the establishment of the GCC, and it casts a heavy shadow on the

idea of Gulf unity. However, it also provides a test for Saudi Arabia leadership role: If the Saudis do not succeed in ensuring quiet at home other countries will not see them as capable of leading the Arab world.