

Circling the Wagons: Middle Eastern Monarchies Confront the 'Arab Spring'

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The events of the “Arab Spring” are still unfolding, but for the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), this “spring” offers little promise. The threat emanating from Iran as well as the lack of confidence in US support gives the Gulf states much to fear and has imbued the GCC with newfound unity and purpose. Recent bids by Morocco and Jordan for membership in what has been, until now, a Persian Gulf organization signifies that the conservative monarchies of the Middle East are determined to protect the status quo in the face of shifting alliances brought about by regional developments.

Background

The GCC, an alliance of Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies, was formed in May 1981 in response to the 1979 Shiite Iranian Islamic Revolution. While attempts at economic integration among these states failed – despite their shared cultural characteristics and oil wealth – the recent revolutions in the Arab world have breathed new life into the organization. For instance, the GCC military force, known as Peninsula Shield, has been revived and, in mid-March, it helped crush a Shiite revolt in Bahrain that was widely believed to be supported by Iran.

The US is generally perceived in the Gulf to have become inadequate in defending it against Iranian influence and to have abandoned its regional allies. Saudi analyst Nawaf Obaid wrote in the Washington Post on May 16:

As Riyadh fights a cold war with Tehran, Washington has shown itself in recent months to be an unwilling and unreliable partner against this threat. The emerging political reality is a Saudi-led Arab world facing off against the aggression of Iran and its non-state proxies.... Saudi Arabia will not allow the political unrest in the region to destabilize the Arab monarchies — the Gulf states, Jordan and Morocco.

Monarchies, Unite!

Recent bids by Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC – despite not being situated in the Persian Gulf – have been welcomed by the Council. Saudi Arabia, which controls the GCC, and ally Bahrain showed great support for this move. But the Kuwaiti daily Al-Qabas reported that Oman, Kuwait and Qatar had some hesitations, preferring a membership status limited to culture and sport.

Yet the public announcement of the bids by GCC Secretary General Abdul Latif al-Zayani on May 10, 2011, was more an important statement of intent than a plan of action. Yemen, after all, had applied for GCC membership years ago and its accession was not very likely. The GCC states were conveying to the Arabs and to the world that monarchies are a stable form of government in the region. And, since they face similar threats that challenge the status quo, they must band together.

These kinds of alliances, or blocs, are not new to the Middle East. The Baghdad Pact of 1955 united Britain, Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan against Egyptian-led Nasserism and Soviet infiltration. Similarly, in March 1991, after Kuwait had been liberated from Iraq by a US-led coalition that

included Egyptian and Syrian forces, the GCC states joined Cairo and Damascus in signing the Damascus Declaration. The declaration embodied a GCC promise of financial help for Egypt and Syria, and Egyptian and Syrian armed forces stationed in the Gulf were referred to as a “nucleus for an Arab peace force to be prepared to guarantee the security and safety of the Arab states in the Gulf region.”

While the Baghdad Pact and Damascus Declaration were short-lived arrangements – reflecting both the reality of the times and the precariousness of such fleeting alliances – the proposed GCC expansion seems to reflect more than just shared sentiment.

In Jordan’s case, its professional, tribe-based, Sunni military force could provide serious backing in the case of an Iranian-inspired Shiite uprising in the Gulf states. King Abdullah II was in fact one of the first to sound the alarm about Iran’s growing influence, stressing, in December 2004, that a “Shiite crescent” was threatening the Sunni world. And, economically strapped Jordan could certainly use some Gulf lucre. Morocco could also benefit from GCC financial support. Its royal family is linked by marriage to the Saudi royals, several of which maintain homes there, adding an additional level of monarchical solidarity.

There seems to be a closing of ranks and a newfound unity of purpose to the GCC. The embracing of Jordan and Morocco certainly reflects serious concerns over the threat of Iran and indicates a revolution against the status quo and a lack of confidence in US support.

Keeping Iran at Bay

Iranian leaders have been fanning the flames of hostility already deeply felt by the Arab Gulf states. In early May, General Hasan Firouzabadi, head of Iran’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, lashed out at the Saudi presence in Bahrain, stating that “unfair and un-Islamic moves will hurt the honor of Muslims in Saudi Arabia, and it will threaten the security of Saudi Arabia.” Senior Revolutionary Guards member Mustafa Mikotien further called for the training of Shiite cells in Bahrain to carry out sabotage missions in Saudi Arabia.

The GCC denounced statements such as those by Firouzabadi as being “aggressive and reflecting [Iran’s] expansionist intentions.” When Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi subsequently visited the Gulf countries, the Saudi government refused to meet with him. Saudi sources said that in order to agree to a meeting with Salehi, Iran would first have to apologize for the vandalism to its consulate in Mashhad and the attack on its embassy in Tehran.

Saudi King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz had told his cabinet in mid-March that the GCC would remain united against any outside country which threatened a member state. To emphasize this point, it was announced that Saudi forces would remain in Bahrain even after the lifting of emergency rule in June. Bahrain’s Foreign Minister, Shaykh Khalid Al Khalifa, told PBS NewsHour that the Gulf countries were looking for ways to expand the GCC forces in order “to have multiple bases everywhere in the GCC.”

Meanwhile, on May 16, a Saudi diplomat was gunned down in Karachi, Pakistan, just four days after a grenade attack on the city’s Saudi consulate. While the Pakistani Taliban claimed credit, the Saudi press blamed Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.

GCC vs. US Interests

The Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, have signaled strongly to the Obama administration that they will be following a more assertive policy towards Iran, “at times conflicting with American interests,” according to Saudi analyst Nawaf Obaid.

Indeed, the GCC states have been diversifying their defense contacts, with Saudi Arabia approaching various Central Asian states, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan to assess potential military assistance. The possibility of integrating Pakistani forces with Saudi forces already in Bahrain was examined. Furthermore, Malaysia demonstrated its willingness to send troops to Bahrain during a visit to Riyadh by Prime Minister Najib Razak. “Malaysia fully backs all sovereign decisions taken by Saudi Arabia and GCC states to safeguard the stability and security of the region in these trying times,” he said.

But it is not so clear that the US opposes a more aggressive Gulf stance towards Iran. While Obaid talked petulantly about “recalibrating” the partnership with the US, Saudi defense cooperation with America has been proceeding apace. Beyond the \$60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia announced by the US in October 2010, the US Navy disclosed in early April 2011 that Riyadh had requested from Washington a proposal for the supply of warships with integrated air and Aegis missile defense systems, as well as helicopters, patrol craft and shore infrastructure. The US, as well, was apparently continuing to train a new Facilities Security Force (FSF) designed to protect sensitive Saudi oil installations. Overseen by Central Command through the Office of the Program Manager-Facilities Security Force (OPM-FSF), the unit was expected, over time, to reach 35,000 strong.

As far as the US commitment to Saudi security is concerned, it is business as usual, and the Saudis know that. In mid-May the US Defense Department announced to Congress that the Saudis were looking to buy another \$330 million worth of military equipment. This time the purchase was to include thermal gun sights, night vision goggles and aiming lasers. During May, as well, over 20 US defense and security companies joined in a trade mission to Saudi Arabia headed by former American Secretary of Defense William Cohen.

Conclusion

In his May 19 speech, President Obama stated: “There will be times when our short-term interests do not align perfectly with our long-term vision of the region.” It is clear that the US and the Saudis will not always see eye-to-eye and at times may conceive of security interests differently. But in the grand scheme of things, the US shares with the Saudis and the other GCC countries a desire for stability and the free flow of oil. Iran is a threat to this strategic goal.

It seems that for the time being the US will let the Saudis have their way. Despite Saudi talk of recalibration, both Washington and Riyadh know that when push comes to shove, the United States has Saudi Arabia’s back.

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