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The Arab Spring: the Changing Dynamics of West-GCC Cooperation

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The Arab uprisings were initially met with quite different reactions in what can loosely be termed the 'West' – here, the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) – and the Gulf countries. Yet, perhaps counter-intuitively, the Arab uprisings have so far resulted in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Western countries working more closely together. Their differences were most pronounced over the uprising in Egypt, where Saudi Arabia in particular disagreed profoundly with the United States' eventual call for an 'orderly transition' away from the rule of then President Hosni Mubarak, a longstanding ally of both the Gulf and the West. More recently, GCC and Western partners have begun to coordinate their policies towards key transition countries: they have supported a limited political transition in Yemen and more drastic change in Libya and Syria. Meanwhile, the West has continued to ally itself with the pro-Western monarchies that have also faced unrest, notably in Bahrain.

This reflects the fact that although Western and Gulf governments say very different things about the value of democracy in the region, they also have a sense of shared *Realpolitik* interests. These include both overlapping interests in the outcomes of events in specific countries in the region and a broader desire on the part of both Western and Gulf governments to continue and enhance their mutual economic and business cooperation; the West needs Gulf capital and markets to help support its economic recovery, and the Gulf needs Western expertise and security assistance.

Yet while they may have common interests, these are not always identical. Notably, there are differences not only about the value of democracy in general, but about the acceptability of specific newly elected governments; in a development that was hardly foreseen before the Arab uprisings, the United States is now more supportive of elected Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia than some Gulf countries are. Moreover, since early 2011, the rapidly evolving regional context has resulted in

increased questioning about the value, reliability and longevity of the West's relations with the GCC. It has also highlighted a number of divergences in the ways in which actors on both sides of the West-GCC divide may seek to influence future developments in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. There is no single policy or strategic approach emanating from either the Gulf countries or the Western countries, let alone from both sets of partners combined.

In this respect, it is important to situate the changes taking place since January 2011 in a broader trajectory of both global and regional change, which predates the surfacing of unrest from Tunisia to Yemen. A key part of the context is the perception that the world's future economic growth – and, critically for the Gulf, global demand for oil and gas – will increasingly be driven by an emergent Asia, rather than by America and Europe. Should the geopolitical assumptions underlying much of the United States' strategic interest in the Gulf as an energy supplier weaken or even dissipate over the coming years, there will be considerable, if as yet unforeseen, repercussions for the US-Gulf relationship.

At the same time, key European countries are concerned that they are already facing increasing competition from rising powers, particularly in Asia, for both commercial opportunities in and diplomatic influence over Gulf states. Such trends will challenge the assumption that the countries described as 'the West' will continue to share the same strategic priorities in a region, in which, contrary to the United States, European nations will continue to have strategic energy-related and commercial interests. Instead, a divergence of priorities between, and even within, transatlantic partnerships may be more likely.

Within the MENA region itself, the most salient features to affect longer-term trends of political change are likely to remain the cumulative effects of demographic change and the region's information revolution, both of which have been much commented on since 2011. Since these developments are structural rather than circumstantial, they will continue to be felt across MENA states despite the reverses and setbacks to the processes unleashed by the popular revolts of 2011. The combined effects of majority populations across the MENA region now being weighted towards the young (with 50 percent or more of MENA populations aged 25-to-30 years) and of the break with the quasi-monopoly over information that the region's authoritarian governments have enjoyed for much of the past fifty years should, in this respect, be regarded as all-but-irreversible.

Attempts to stem the tide of demands for greater economic, political and social participation may thus succeed over the short-term, but the generational challenges to largely ageing leaderships will require more than stop-gap responses over the longer term. Equally, the effects of higher levels of education, however imperfectly applied across MENA states, including the access by larger numbers of people to a wider set of regional and global influences afforded by new technologies, mean that pressures for substantial change within MENA states will continue to mount in coming years.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR WEST-GCC RELATIONS

The ambiguously evolving relations between the West and the GCC need to be placed in the context of processes that started prior to 2011, in the global redistribution of wealth brought about partly through long-term shifts in commodity prices, and through eastward and southward shifts in economic, demographic and productivity growth.

As a result of these shifts, relations between 'centre' and 'periphery' states in the world system are being redefined, in a way that has benefited the profile of GCC states as key leaders of regional organisations, increasingly expected to provide the bulk of aid and investment to the rest of region. As noted above, this has also been supplemented by the Gulf's investment in the West following the financial crisis of 2007-08.

At the same time, shifts of power within states – whether these have started from elites engaging a broader base of popular support, or through the impact of education and technology and the rise of new elites – are increasingly troubling GCC leaderships. At the regional level in the MENA, the shifts of power within states are also weakening the ability of states such as Egypt, post-Arab Spring, to be regional foreign policy actors, even if this is short-term. The inability of Mubarak's Egypt to project regional 'depth' in the way that Nasserite Egypt did in the mid-20th century played into the hand of the 'status quo' policies of the Gulf states. It is now the unknown qualities of future Egyptian leadership, above all under the Muslim Brotherhood, that is of concern to GCC states.

At the same time, and in the context of the uncertain results of the lengthy military commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, the coherence of US and EU policy cooperation has also come under some strain, notwithstanding NATO's involvement in Libya in 2011. The United States,

as was widely recognised well before President Barack Obama's re-election in November 2012, has been pivoting more towards Asia than its traditional alliances in Europe, which, in turn, are seen to be overly slow in definitively resolving the euro-crisis, and preoccupied with the internal dynamics and future of the European Union itself. The result has been little appetite for direct military engagement in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Libya highlighted a US desire to 'lead from behind' while Syria has highlighted the lack of public and political will to commit ground troops, in contrast with 2003 Iraq.

On another key area of common interest, the United States and European Union have been cooperating effectively in establishing and implementing common policies towards Iran over its nuclear programme, in terms of both diplomacy and the intensified economic and financial sanctions regime. EU officials see this as a relative success story for European foreign policy. However, it has yet to bear fruit in terms of changing Iranian behaviour or securing a deal with Iran's leadership.

Meanwhile, although the Gulf states rely heavily on Western countries to provide them with implicit security guarantees against any threat of attack by Iran, some are dissatisfied with what they see as too soft an American approach towards Tehran. This reflects deep differences over the 2003 regime change in Iraq, widely perceived in the Gulf as having paved the way for Iran to exert its influence, to the point of taking over a strategically vital Arab country. US officials see more nuances between Iraqi and Iranian policies in the region, but this view is often regarded in the Gulf as either naive or disingenuous. The GCC countries would also like to see the United States and the European Union playing a more effective role in pushing for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, in particular, in supporting the Arab Peace Initiative, launched by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in 2002, before transitions in the region render that initiative entirely defunct.

For the GCC, its own integration into the global system has taken the path of assuming a greater role in international arrangements, above all the G20 and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and in securing symbolic importance in areas such as global sport and cultural production. This raises the question of whether the international system is simply integrating the least threatening, wealthiest and most pro-Western countries into its ranks, and whether GCC states will be capable of remaking the rules. Underlying this is a new concern with the extent to

which GCC countries can, or indeed do represent wider Arab and Islamic populations, most of whom live outside the GCC.

The Gulf's pivot has also, like the United States, turned to Asia, insofar as south-south trade has provoked greater interest in south-south diplomacy and south-south security cooperation. This is a relatively new and exploratory area for now, but reflects a potential reassessment of the GCC's four key dependencies, the first being the GCC's reliance on Western security guarantees for its own security, the others being their economies' dependency on hydrocarbons, imported goods, and imported migrant labour – overwhelmingly drawn from Asia and above all the Indian sub-continent.

The GCC's alliances with Western states are heavily tilted towards the United States for security reasons, above all, with links to the United Kingdom (UK), as the former colonial power, being increasingly supplemented by that of France as the other main provider of arms and users of military bases in the Gulf.

This pattern is different when it comes to trade, as there is very little direct trade between the GCC and the United States beyond the oil sector. Saudi Arabia's energy exports to the United States have already been overtaken by those to China in recent years, but America still imported 20 percent of its global energy needs from the Gulf in 2012.¹ Regardless of where the United States purchases its oil from, it needs Saudi Arabia to help keep the global price of oil down by adjusting its production and supplies to global markets where, as a fungible commodity, oil prices are set to a greater degree than gas, for which longer-term bilateral contracts are drawn up.

Nonetheless, expectations of long-term shifts in the United States' energy supply structure may reduce the extent to which maintaining low international oil prices is a chief priority for US policy. In the *World Energy Outlook* report published by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in mid-November 2012, the most startling assessment was that by 2020 the United States will be producing and exporting more oil than Saudi Arabia, at 11.1 million barrels and 10.6 million barrels a day respectively.² While this is far from universally accepted, it has led to further debates about the future of US-Saudi relations, as have a number of studies indicating

¹ Data from US Energy Information Administration.

² International Energy Agency (2012), *World Energy Outlook 2012*, Paris, 12 November, <http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/publications/weo-2012/#d.en.26099>.

that Saudi Arabia's oil export capacity is being squeezed by its rapidly mounting domestic consumption.³ The relations between the West and the Gulf countries are not shaped only by oil, but energy security has been one of the key factors affecting their ties for the past four decades, and the perception that the United States is moving towards energy self-sufficiency is already beginning to affect the thinking and behaviour of parties in both the West and the Gulf.

In terms of the GCC's options for alternative partners, these are plentiful on the economic front, but not so obvious on the security front. For European firms concerned about competition from rising powers, a watershed moment came in 2009 when the United Arab Emirates (UAE) gave the contract for its civilian nuclear power system to a South Korean consortium firm rather than a French firm to build and operate four 1,400 megawatt reactors in total.⁴ This has led Western firms to question their previous assumptions that while East Asia could out-compete them on low-cost consumer goods, they would necessarily have a comparative advantage when it came to higher-tech products and construction contracts. In many areas, Western brands still have an edge owing to perceptions of higher quality, but competition in other areas, such as healthcare and pharmaceuticals in India, has been on the increase.

There are few options for newer security partners to replace the United States' overwhelming role in providing security for the GCC countries in the near term, despite the concerns of Gulf leaderships that America has 'gone soft' on military deterrence, above all in respect to Iran's nuclear capabilities. Where there is potential for diversification it is in the number of rising powers who could provide alternative sources of arms as well as some military support. The main alternative contender in the long-term would be China, given that it has just overtaken the United States as the world's largest oil importer.⁵ But China does not

³ Glada Lahn and Paul Stevens (2011), *Burning Oil to Keep Cool: The Hidden Energy Crisis in Saudi Arabia*, Chatham House Energy, Environment and Resource Governance Programme, December. http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Energy,percent20Environmentpercent20andpercent20Development/1211pr_lahn_stevens.pdf.

⁴ "South Korea awarded UAE nuclear power contract," *BBC News*, 27 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8431904.stm>.

⁵ "China becomes world's top oil importer," *Financial Times*, 4 March 2013, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d33b5104-84a1-11e2-aaf1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2N-Dqz6310>.

yet have an appetite to patrol the Gulf when it can essentially free-ride on the United States' role there, and Washington is reluctant to consider losing its pre-eminence to China in this sphere. The Chinese honeymoon in the Gulf has also been soured for the time-being by its pro-regime stance on Syria.

Similarly, the Syrian impasse has chilled Gulf relations with Russia, which was never close to the Gulf states (which were on the US side in the Cold War), but began to reach out to the GCC a few years ago. In 2007 Vladimir Putin became the first Russian leader to visit Saudi Arabia and Russian media outlets reported that the two countries were engaged in serious talks about possible arms sales in 2010. In August 2011, a Bahraini official confirmed that the country was talking to Russia about cooperating in various areas, including in the provision of light arms, and Bloomberg reported a Russian official as saying Russia would sell the country Kalashnikovs, at a time when the United States had frozen a planned arms deal and European countries had withdrawn a number of arms export licences. However, it is not clear if this particular deal ever actually materialised, not least since it took place at around the same time that the GCC states were stepping up their pressure on Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, and when Russia and China had just vetoed a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution imposing sanctions on the Syrian regime. The Saudi Arabian chambers of commerce subsequently cancelled meetings with a Russian business delegation due earlier this year, while Bahrain's defence chief has said the country could acquire arms from a number of other countries. These have included Turkey, which provided Bahraini riot police with armoured vehicles routinely used in the suppression of protests.

The GCC's discussion of expanding membership to include Jordan and Morocco is unlikely to materialise but will lead to greater cooperation. Part of the motivation is for the Arab monarchies to band together. Another motivation for the GCC seeking greater cooperation with Jordan in particular is that Jordan has a large, well-trained army.

EVOLVING RESPONSES TO THE SHOCK OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The regional policies of both sets of countries across the West-GCC divide have been changing over time, but have been brought up short by the

Arab Spring for the simple reason that there was no strategy to deal with these unexpected changes. Now, as the complexities of change (at different speeds but with equally unforeseen consequences) have spread across the region, the extent of the long-term effects of the watershed year of 2011 remains unclear.

When Tunisia's uprising started, there was little difference between the responses from the Gulf and Western governments alike. Famously, the then French foreign minister suggested France should send security forces to assist President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in putting down the uprising, which – subsequent to Ben Ali's removal – sparked a political storm that led to her resignation. Ultimately it was Saudi Arabia rather than France that agreed to receive the fleeing president in exile. While France may have been mindful of the prospect for protests from within its large Tunisian diaspora, Saudi Arabia arguably helped to facilitate Ben Ali's departure by giving him a safe haven. A number of key officials in both the West and the Gulf also downplayed the risk of a domino effect.

It was with the uprising in Egypt – a far larger and more strategically important country – that significant differences began to emerge between the bulk of the GCC states and Western governments. Saudi Arabia strongly opposed the US decision to call for Mubarak to step down. Yet in retrospect the difference may be exaggerated. US officials have emphasised their role in persuading the army to back a transition, yet this came at the last minute. When the protests began, US officials were still praising Mubarak as an ally and US Vice-President Joe Biden said he was not a dictator. The differences came later. The United States, above all, did not want to see an army it backed financially firing on protestors in such a strategic capital as Cairo, while the King of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz al Saud, was reported to have phoned President Obama to object to his approach.

This episode has remained a source of tension in US-Gulf relations, partly because of divergent perceptions over the extent to which the United States was able to control the political situation in Egypt. In general, US policymakers think that they had limited leverage and few options but to accept what was a fundamentally locally driven transition, while Gulf observers tend to see the United States as playing a far more significant role behind the scenes in deciding it was time for Mubarak's rule to end.

In the post-Mubarak transition period, governments in the Gulf and the West have continued to share a common interest in containing the

impact of Egypt's domestic revolution on the country's foreign policy. Specifically, they have been keen to see that the newly elected Egyptian government does not cancel or flout the 1979 Camp David peace treaty with Israel; that Egypt does not switch from the perceived pro-US camp in the region to the perceived pro-Iranian 'resistance axis'; and that Egypt maintains a broadly liberal economic policy rather than nationalising key industries or throwing out foreign investment. Since none of these fundamental interests have been threatened so far, the United States and other Western countries have enjoyed something of a honeymoon with the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood government – to such an extent that there are even local conspiracy theories suggesting that Washington plotted the revolution in order to install the Muslim Brotherhood. For Western democracies, promoting democracy overseas has rarely if ever been a top policy priority, but if more fundamental security and economic interests are not seen as being threatened, Western democracies tend to exhibit a preference for allies that are elected, seeing them as more legitimate and stable.

By contrast, for most of the Gulf countries, the Muslim Brotherhood has been harder to accept, for the simple reason that the GCC states fear the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood within their own countries (apart from Qatar, which has broken rank with the rest of the Gulf in its enthusiastic support for Brotherhood-associated groups, and Bahrain, where the government has traditionally seen the Brotherhood as a counterweight to opposition from among the Shi'ite majority population). Thus, the Gulf countries would have preferred to see Ahmed Shafiq, a former air force chief and the last prime minister appointed by Mubarak, to have won the 2012 presidential elections, instead of Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party. The Gulf states – particularly the Emirates – continue to see the way in which Western governments are developing ties with Muslim Brotherhood-inspired governments as naive at best, while some within the Gulf governments harbour anxieties that the West will eventually switch sides in the Gulf as well.

Further differences came when the protests started in Bahrain in February 2011, which initially caused a rift between the United States and the Gulf – but the rift proved temporary, even if the protests did not. With the support of the other GCC states, the Bahraini authorities were able to forcibly put down their uprising and still maintain strong ties with Western governments, even if their reputation among business, media and civil society has been greatly damaged.

This episode deserves particular examination as it is a test case of Western responses to unrest and repression within the Gulf itself. Initially, condemnation of the shooting of protestors, which the Bahraini government said was a mistake, led to backing for the crown prince to lead a dialogue initiative. The US preference for dialogue and reform was made clear by the mission of Jeffrey Feltman, who sought to broker an agreement on a transitional government of national unity. Negotiations were reportedly given a six week period to succeed, but four weeks in, they broke down and GCC troops, mainly from Saudi Arabia, entered Bahrain to support the al-Khalifa ruling family as the Bahraini authorities moved to put down the uprising.

According to the royally commissioned Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, talks broke down because the opposition party al-Wifaq said it would not participate in a dialogue with the crown prince unless he could guarantee that a new constitution would be written (on the basis of a constitutional monarchy) and put to a national referendum. While talks were failing, more rejectionist opposition groups were turning up the temperature on the streets. Amid calls for abolishing the monarchy altogether, roadblocks were erected around the Bahrain Financial Harbour and there were violent clashes between police and protestors, resulting in several deaths, mostly on the side of the protesters but also including policemen and expatriates.

The Bahraini authorities, for the most part, blamed Iran, and called for foreign protection against a supposed external threat, while Western governments – whose intelligence services were sceptical in the absence of any solid evidence of Iranian involvement beyond moral support for protestors from the Iranian media – tended to see the problem as fundamentally driven by domestic grievances that were within the hands of the Bahraini authorities to resolve. There are, however, shades of grey. There are those within the Bahraini regime who have always seen the protests as fundamentally driven by domestic grievances. But their hand was weakened by the failure to reach a deal with the opposition – especially after the entry of GCC forces. This decisively shifted the balance of power within the ruling al-Khalifa family towards hardliners such as the prime minister, in power since 1971, whose personal position would undoubtedly have been threatened if an agreement between the protestors had been reached, and a younger generation of security-minded conservatives headed by two brothers, the head of the army and the head of the royal court, had ascended to power. Where Western countries (and

to some extent, elements in Kuwait and Oman) saw hope in the crown prince and the (now marginalised) ruling family reformists, other powerful players in the Gulf (chiefly Saudi Arabia and the Emirates) saw them as ill-informed.

There is some ambiguity over whether the West supported the entry of Saudi troops. Bahraini opposition activists accused the United States of giving them the green light, noting – in the way that Gulf observers tend towards their own forms of Kremlinology – that then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was in Bahrain just before the move took place. Yet Western accounts suggest that the United States was presented with the decision as a *fait accompli*; it did not oppose it, but it is not clear it would have had either legal or political grounds to do so. Then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said the move was legal under the GCC's collective security pact. A Saudi political analyst, Nawaf Obaid, later wrote that the US government had been against it.⁶

But there were virtually no tangible changes in relations – the United States and the United Kingdom resumed weapons sales, albeit withholding certain items like tear gas canisters, and in October 2012 the UK government signed a new defence cooperation agreement with Bahrain. A number of European states – with fewer defence and business interests involved – have been more outspoken. Notably, Denmark has suggested Europe should consider sanctions against some regime members. Yet Western states were not even able to achieve unity on a Swiss-sponsored resolution condemning human rights abuses in Bahrain, which 27 countries signed in June 2012 ahead of Bahrain's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in September, but which the United Kingdom and United States refused to sign.

The most surprising aspect of the Bahraini crisis for many in the West was the unforeseen activism of its Gulf neighbours, above all Saudi Arabia. GCC states have gained in regional assertiveness over the past two years, most notably in brokering the arranged departure of President Ali Abdullah Saleh from protest-ridden Yemen in 2011, and in hosting the more recent negotiations for the creation, and subsequent recognition, of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in Doha in November 2012. Meanwhile, Western countries have worked

⁶ Nawaf Obaid, "Amid the Arab Spring, a US-Saudi Split," *Washington Post*, 15 May 2011, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-05-15/opinions/35263284_1_saudi-arabia-saudi-government-saudi-leaders.

closely with the GCC on Yemen and Libya, and have continued this cooperation to date over Syria.

In Yemen, the GCC, headed by a Bahraini former security official, Abdulatif al-Zayani, brokered a deal that saw President Saleh step down as part of an international effort to support a controlled transition, in the face of fears that the country could return to civil war. Yemen's transition has been seen by UN and Western officials as a particularly successful example of cooperation between Western countries and the GCC acting as a bloc, yet Yemeni democracy activists see both the West and the GCC as trying to contain pressures for a deeper regime change that might go beyond the removal of Saleh himself to address deep-seated issues of authoritarianism, profound state corruption, and calls for a less centralised state. The delivery of aid pledged by the 'Friends of Yemen' group, which includes both Western and Gulf countries, has also been slow and incomplete, especially in response to a UN-backed humanitarian appeal to alleviate the hunger suffered by nearly half of Yemen's thirty million people.

For both Western and Gulf governments – especially the United States and Saudi Arabia – security concerns have been paramount in policy towards Yemen. Both Washington and Riyadh place a particular priority on the ongoing 'war on terror' in Yemen, seen as a safe haven for fighters from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), some of them from Saudi Arabia. The interim president, Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, has been quietly supportive of US counter-terrorism operations continuing in Yemen, including drone strikes, which have risen significantly in numbers since he took power and which overtook the number seen in Pakistan for the first time in 2012. Hadi's appointment was decided by elites and then rubber-stamped by a popular 'election' with only one name on the ballot paper.

In the case of Libya, there was initially a strong international consensus on implementing a UNSC resolution authorising military action to prevent what appeared likely to be imminent massacres of Libyan opposition fighters and civilians, openly threatened by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. The GCC played an important role in persuading the Arab League to endorse the UN-sanctioned intervention despite opposition from Syria and Algeria in particular; Arab League backing was crucial in persuading Russia and China not to adopt their usual stance of vetoing foreign military intervention, although they secured an explicit prohibition of the deployment of ground troops (both Russia and China regretted their decision after the UNSC mandate was stretched to justify regime change). The Emirates and Qatar also participated in the NATO-led

operation alongside Britain, France and others, with the United States adopting an attitude of 'leading from behind', partly because of intense scepticism among the US public about the wisdom of another intervention in the Middle East at a time of economic austerity. There was some speculation – stoked by reported comments by Gulf officials – that the GCC's support for the operation in Libya helped compensate for the differences over Bahrain. The temporary loss of Libyan oil output also highlighted Saudi Arabia's vital role in stabilising the international oil market, as it increased its own output to compensate.

In a different way to Bahrain, Syria has now become a test case for differing visions of what the conflict represents and what the best-case outcome might be for Syria and the broader region. In terms of opposition to the Assad presidency and the desire to see him and his dynastic regime toppled, there remains a unity of purpose between the West and GCC states, above all Qatar and Saudi Arabia which led some shaky Arab League initiatives in the first half of 2011 to persuade Assad, like Yemen's Saleh before him, to step down. However, there is no clear consensus over preferred outcomes for the future of Syria beyond the removal of the Assad regime, pending which, there have been occasional friction between the United States and some Gulf countries who would prefer to see the US government taking a more decisive, assertive and interventionist role.

Failing this, and in the wake of the failed plan of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and the equally thwarted Western-led efforts to secure a series of UN Security Council resolutions against Assad, vetoed by Russia and China, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have more recently been instrumental in working with the US leadership to bring the Syrian National Council into negotiations with a broader array of opposition forces. An agreement to this end was eventually brokered and concluded in the Qatari capital Doha.

However, in terms of concrete support to rebel groups within Syria, the initially discreet, but now more openly discussed, arming of individual militias by Saudi and Qatari funders has gone beyond what the West has countenanced in terms of lethal material support to the armed resistance. In northern Syria, above all, the fragmentation of the local armed resistance, and the increasing presence on the ground of well-armed and foreign militias and *jihadist* groups have cast doubt over the

extent to which the Sunni Muslim states of the Gulf are happy to see the Syrians determine their own fate in the future.⁷

POST-2011 STRATEGIES: STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS

Increasing political diversity across the MENA region means that Western policy has become even less consistent and coherent than usual. Beyond the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) initiatives towards the Mediterranean states of North Africa, there is considerable diversity among Western countries over the desirability of democracy if it means greater instability, of talking to Islamists, and over the desired depth of relations that the West should have with the Gulf. Moreover, divisions over these and related issues also exist among GCC states. There are also multiple factors determining Western policy towards the Gulf region. Close relations with GCC states may have less to do with a shared or coordinated response to the Arab uprisings than with pre-existing economic relationships whose importance has only been emphasised by recent global economic trends.

Both Western and Gulf governments view economic factors as being among the key drivers of the unrest that has swept the Arab world since 2011, but there is no consensus between them on the role of political grievances. The Gulf countries prefer to emphasise the role of economic grievances – the rising cost of living, unemployment and anger over the combination of official corruption and dilapidated infrastructure and public services. This approach is also evident in their domestic responses to the threat of unrest, which have tended to focus on increasing public spending and creating new state-sponsored jobs. Western governments, by contrast, also emphasise the role of the region's democratic deficit, human rights abuses and police brutality in generating grievances.

Western and Gulf governments are cooperating on a number of initiatives to deliver aid to the transition countries and to the reforming monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, notably through the European Union and the G-8 sponsored Deauville Partnership. However, the Western insistence on tying the delivery of much-needed aid to Egypt to an as-yet-elu-

⁷ Rani Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who are the Saudis and Qataris arming?" *Time Magazine*, 18 September 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/09/18/syrias-secular-and-islamist-rebels-who-are-the-saudis-and-the-qataris-arming/>.

sive agreement on an International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme for the country has seriously delayed inflows of Western aid. This has caused some resentment in Egypt, where the IMF is not popular and is seen as having lavished praise on the economic policies of the former regime. Here, and elsewhere in North Africa, the Gulf states have outpaced their Western allies, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular making much-needed funds available to help shore up the Egyptian budget and currency, along with higher levels of investment to regional allies, above all Morocco. More opaquely, there are flows of money from Saudi, Qatari and Kuwaiti donors to both Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups in the transition countries, which can be seen both as a manifestation of religious sympathies and as an attempt to influence the political agenda in these countries, but the extent of official endorsement of such flows is unclear and is deeply contested.

More broadly, both the GCC and Western countries are still in the process of framing and constructing their interests in responding to the Arab transitions, most notably in GCC attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood following the latter's assumption of government responsibilities in Egypt and the influence that movements close to the Muslim Brotherhood exercise across the region. There is as yet no consensus within the GCC over how to respond to the sudden prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates: while Qatar is aligning itself with Muslim Brotherhood parties across the region, and while Bahrain has appointed a leader of its local Muslim Brotherhood party as its minister for human rights, the Emirates has recently imprisoned ninety-four citizens suspected of belonging to a local version of the organisation.

GCC countries are concerned by the perceived Western acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood as a democratic partner. It remains unclear, however, how far Western countries really have embraced the advent of democracy to the region. One interpretation might be that, for pragmatic reasons, Western governments are working with the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist-inspired governments (such as the Ennahda-led coalition in Tunisia) because they are the new powers-that-be. Western interests in the region are still contested and unclear, and there is, as ever, a significant gap between rhetoric and reality when it comes to democracy and human rights.

Given the normative aspects of US and EU external relations (most succinctly summarised as the promotion of good governance, democracy and human rights), Western countries have found themselves

at an increasing disadvantage in articulating a coherent strategy. The European Union's approach has been to promise 'more for more' and offer 'less for less' in terms of the region's progress towards democracy, but this has fallen victim to the vicissitudes of the political dynamics of the region, and lacks agreed criteria for measuring advances and setbacks to the democratisation process. For the Gulf in particular, the Arab Spring has increased the visibility of the contradictions for Western diplomacy of doing business in the ways it has been accustomed to prior to 2011. The broad welcome Western governments have accorded to democratic change in North Africa and Egypt sits uneasily with the increasing domestic and regional pressures on the United States and the European Union to support the same values of democracy and self-determination across the whole MENA region, including the Gulf. British Prime Minister David Cameron's November 2012 visit to the Gulf region, for example, was preceded by public assurances that he would raise human rights concerns with his hosts in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates on a tour otherwise dedicated to securing contracts for the sale of up to a hundred British-produced Typhoon jets. As a BBC journalist, Frank Gardner, accompanying the tour, put it: 'Mr Cameron knows he must raise the thorny issue of human rights with his hosts. He also knows that if he pushes too hard then Britain risks losing major contracts to countries that ask no questions'.⁸

The inherent tensions between humanitarian, democratic, commercial, financial and geostrategic priorities are likely to become more, rather than less acute in coming years, unless a new balance can be struck in the type of relationships the West forges with new and well-established Gulf actors and allies. So far this has largely stopped short of engaging with opposition leaderships (except in the case of Bahrain), or openly championing the cause of greater public and political accountability across the Gulf.

Ironically, while Gulf governments complain about activities of Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the region's democracy activists generally do not see the West as being on their side, and often portray Western powers and the Gulf as co-operating in an effort to contain the impact of Arab uprisings on the regional system (especially over economic models and over Israel).

⁸ "David Cameron in the Gulf: defence sales 'legitimate'," *BBC News*, 5 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20202058>.

GULF PERCEPTIONS OF THE COLONIAL LEGACY

The GCC has long had ambivalent relations with its colonial tradition, and is still expressing a collective frustration with global imbalances of power and the continued dominance (sometimes arrogance) of the West. Yet, GCC states are net beneficiaries of this perceived Western control of international affairs. The management of their accrued wealth and the attractions of investing in spheres previously dominated by the West, such as the arts, architecture, sports, design and modern forms of leisure and consumerism all symbolise the ambivalence of Gulf elites' feelings over the legacy and cultural influences of the West. Critics of the wealthy Gulf states often depict them as pure colonial inventions or puppet states, but this is too simplistic. The real ambivalence for Gulf leaderships lies in attempting to marry their pro-Western political stances with their local self-presentation as authentic Islamic and Arab leaders, when, in reality, the latter is based on their much-vaunted oil wealth, and on achievements in developing state infrastructures.

Western leaders are often too ready to assume that the Gulf's monarchies are necessarily legitimate regional leaders – or the representatives of the wider Arab or Muslim community they claim to protect – whereas the populations of GCC states are a minority in the Arab world (with an overall population of around forty-two million, including expatriates, compared to a total Arab world population of over three hundred million). In the Islamic world, the vast majority of Muslims can now be found in Asia. It is therefore primarily because of its concentration of wealth and natural resources that the GCC exerts the regional influence it does.

With its own authoritarian systems coming under increasing domestic and regional pressure, GCC states are also now pushing back against democracy promotion as a new form of Western colonialism – facilitated by the crude rhetoric on democracy promotion deployed by the United States during the Iraq war. For instance, at a summit of GCC interior ministers in November 2012, the Bahraini interior minister, Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, said that the Gulf countries were facing a 'new colonial onslaught', using the names of democracy, freedom and human rights to impose foreign concepts 'that are different from what we believe or want to protect'.⁹

⁹ "Interior Minister Addresses GCC Meeting," *Bahrain News Agency*, 13 November 2012, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/533150>.

Yet it is historically inaccurate to identify democracy entirely with the West¹⁰, and GCC states now have to contend with the emergence of new regional actors who want to experiment with political models that draw both on local traditions and on practices from elsewhere, appealing both to Islamic and Arab values and to ideas of democracy and human rights. European states were authoritarian for most of their history, while Kuwait's constitution and parliament is older than Spain's in its current form. Hereditary monarchies, especially those inherited by the first-born son, were consolidated in the Gulf and in Jordan under European colonialism.¹¹ There are many models of democracy, which Gulf leaders are quite right to emphasise, and it is likely that the relations between religion and state will be different in each case, as has also been the case in Europe.

WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF THE GULF STATES

Since the first shocks of 2011 subsided, there has been some complacency in the West about the ability of GCC states to buy off dissent and to rely on the assumed traditional legitimacy of monarchy. The widely received wisdom that the Arab Spring somehow bypassed the Gulf ignores the sustained political crisis in Bahrain in particular, but also fails to explain the protest movements in Kuwait and Oman. Saudi Arabia has also been more affected than is often acknowledged by its own youth bulge, and the influence of the information revolution on domestic activism, inspired by uprisings elsewhere in the region. Change is nevertheless likely to materialise in different ways than through large street protests, which remain religiously and socially taboo, with the main exception of the Eastern Province, where protestors representing the distinct grievances of the Shi'ite population have failed to make substantial links with broader national protest movements.

¹⁰ Many counterexamples are explored in Amartya Sen (2007), *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company.

¹¹ See, for instance, Lisa Anderson (1991), "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No.1 (spring), p. 1-15. "Monarchy as currently understood in the Middle East is no more indigenous than liberal democracy" p. 3.

The relative stability in the Emirates and Qatar reflects some other factors as well, not least the relative minority of indigenous Arab citizens who consider themselves, and are treated as, elites in otherwise expatriate-dominated populations. There is also a need to look more closely at the extent to which the major public spending pledges of Gulf leaders have actually reached the people, such as the new housing commitments made in Saudi Arabia. For the Gulf's Western allies to be sure that high levels of spending constitute a sustainable strategy to secure their own interests in the region, it should also be born in mind that the high international oil prices needed to sustain this approach will ultimately be underwritten by the oil importing countries.

Public opinion is often more critical of the Gulf countries – especially Saudi Arabia, whose image in the West suffers from particularly negative perceptions about its treatment of women – than governments are. In a recent Chatham House survey of UK public opinion on foreign policy priorities, Saudi Arabia was one of the top ten countries listed as 'viewed unfavourably' by the respondents; it was ranked as the 8th least favourably perceived country (chosen by 16 percent of the 2,079 respondents, each of whom was asked to choose the five countries they perceived most and least favourably).¹² In the influential Chicago Council survey of US public opinion on foreign policy, the 2012 paper includes no mention of any of the Gulf states in the chapter on the Middle East, focusing instead on perceptions that the Iraq war was not worthwhile and on the mixed views of the Arab Spring in the United States.¹³

The gap between Western governments' rhetoric on norms of democracy and human rights, and their actual practices, partly reflects the ambiguous positions of domestic public opinion in America and Europe. These populations want to think that their countries are broadly benevolent, but they also want jobs and security, and are unsure about the extent of Western leverage in a post-colonial world. The conflict in Syria has focused greater Western attention on the risks of sectarian polarisation – and sectarian violence – in the region. While some analysts

¹² Jonathan Knight, Robin Niblett and Thomas Raines (2012), *The Chatham House-YouGov Survey 2012: Hard Choices Ahead*, Chatham House, July, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/184631>.

¹³ Dina Smeltz (2012), *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium: Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*, The Chicago Council On Global Affairs, October.

have seen an opportunity to ally with Sunni groups and states against Shi'ite Iran, there are serious long-term risks for conflict associated with exploiting sectarian and ethnic fissures for short-term gains. An increasing number of voices are warning against taking sides in what is sometimes portrayed as an escalating Sunni-Shi'ite confrontation in the region. In reality, the current spike in sectarian tensions is likely to have more to do with the politics of what Vali Nasr has called a Saudi-Iranian Cold War than with the longstanding religious differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The setbacks to protest movements across the MENA region have so far indicated the residual ability of authoritarian states to resist demands for greater political inclusion and political reform. Even in the Gulf region, where political opposition has differed in both focus and intensity across the member states of the GCC, the quiescence of the region's populations cannot be taken for granted over the longer term. This is especially true in states, above all Saudi Arabia, where a combination of economic pressures and succession issues are likely to come to the fore in coming years.¹⁵

This prospect poses a dilemma for the West, insofar as the GCC has long been seen as a pole of stability in the wider MENA region, where security cooperation, particularly over the long-standing Iranian nuclear issue, and more recently over Syria, has primed the structuring of bilateral and trans-regional relations. At a time of financial and economic crisis in the West, GCC states have also been a critical source of financial support as well as commercially important export markets for Western services and manufactures, above all arms. The impact of these priorities, along

¹⁴ See, for instance, Paddy Ashdown, "Who Should We Back In This Sunni-Shia Cold War?," *The Times*, 12 December, 2012 <http://www.shafaqna.com/english/component/k2/item/10119-who-should-we-back-in-this-sunni-shia-war?.html>; or James Jeffrey, "Avoiding A Sectarian Split in the Middle East," *Washington Post*, 7 September 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-09-07/opinions/35497070_1_sunni-shiite-shiite-sunni-shiite-groups.

¹⁵ Glada Lahn and Paul Stevens (2011), *Burning Oil to Keep Cool: the Hidden Energy Crisis in Saudi Arabia*, cit.

with the critical role played by Saudi Arabia amongst the Gulf states of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in not only supplying oil, but in stabilising oil prices in times of crisis, means that that the West has traditionally run shy of openly criticising the centralised and authoritarian nature of Gulf regimes.

This may go on, however, to pose a further set of challenges to the West. While the United States and the European Union currently share with Gulf leaders a similar set of objectives concerning regional security and stability, the greater involvement of Gulf actors in the application of their own strategies and priorities across the MENA region may, in practice, highlight increasing divergences in the real national and regional interests of states on both sides of the West-GCC divide. This will be particularly so if democracy is eventually consolidated in Arab transition countries, a scenario that would be likely to add to the demands for political change in the Gulf itself.

Thanks to strong intergovernmental contacts, trading interests and the personalised relationships that have characterised Gulf-West alliances, shared priorities have survived a number of setbacks and disappointments over more than fifty years. In the last decade, these have included the 9/11 attacks on the United States, in which Saudi militants played a critical role; the stagnation of EU-GCC trade talks; the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003; and the absence of Saudi Arabia and Oman from NATO's initiative for cooperation with the Gulf countries. So far, the EU-US-GCC relationship has survived the testing times of the Arab uprisings. In the longer term, however, questions remain over whether the foundations of the US-EU-GCC relationship can survive the challenges of global and regional changes outlined above.