

The Security of the Persian Gulf after the Arab Revolutions

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Abstract

The Arab revolutions have changed the political and security landscape of the Persian Gulf. The upheavals have altered the sources of threats states used to feel from those emanating from outside the internal ones; the unrest in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia has proved that the sources of tension for the Arab states are quite societal. As a result, the old Arab tactic of attribution of domestic challenges to alleged Iranian interventionism is now obsolete. The traditional role played by the regional powers is also affected and the regional alignments are in flux. The overthrow of the Mubarak regime along with the U.S middle of the way approach during the Arab revolutions have elevated Iran's stance in the Persian Gulf at the expense of the U.S and the GCC. Moreover, the security interdependence of the Persian Gulf states, particularly among the GCC, is tightened and in the face of increasing security challenges, the monarchical bloc is revitalized with the aim to buttress Arab regimes. All the said developments are the subject of examination in this article through application of the regional security complex (RSC) theory.

Keywords: The Persian Gulf, regional security complex, security interdependence, existential threats, enmity and amity patterns.

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Introduction

During the years 2011 and 2012, the Arab world has gone through a series of developments which are going to change the fate of the once 'exceptional' region (Blaydes & Lo 2011; Jreisat 2006; Spindel 2011). It has turned out that the North African and Middle Eastern resistance to democracy and longevity of authoritarianism is finally over. Starting from Tunisia, the winds of change casted aside Egyptian and Libyan dictators and shook others in Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Oman and Bahrain. The patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely (Anderson, 2011: 2) but they had one message in common: the era of absolutism in the Middle East is coming to an end. Although the dusts of Arabian upheavals have yet to settle and the ongoing civil-military competitions in Egypt, and Syria and Bahrain's unclear future cast doubt on the prospects of a truly democratic Middle East, the certain and irreversible fact is that the Middle East is not going to return to its pre-revolutions status. Three dictatorial regimes have already fallen and inspired by both Islamic and modern concepts (Mabley, 2012: 90) the walls of resistance to democracy are now fractured elsewhere in the region.

The consequences of the said developments have not been only domestic but also regional and even international. The Persian Gulf has been among the regions being gravely affected; some of the Persian Gulf states, most notably Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, have seen popular unrest. Other states, even if not hit by the revolutionary waves directly, have been deeply affected by their consequences. Now with revolution at the doorstep of the Persian Gulf and with their neighbors



in the wider region being swept over by revolutionary tides, what are the actual changes the sub-region has gone through? In what ways have the Arab revolutions affected the Persian Gulf as a sub-regional system? Has the regional actors' perception of threats now changed? And what impact has the revolutions left on the regional alignments and alliance formations? In order to answer these questions the notion of regional security complex (RSC) is at work in this article upon which the discussions are developed; the Persian Gulf is regarded as a sub-regional security complex whose dynamics are affected by the Arab revolutions. Four indicators of regional structure and roles, enmity and amity patterns, existential threats and security interdependence are extracted from the theory and utilized to examine the impacts of the revolutions on the Persian Gulf.

I- The Persian Gulf as a (Sub) Regional Security Complex

The regional security complex (RSC) theory is a product of the Copenhagen School which is developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver. Along with the two central concepts of securitization and sectoral security, this theory is regarded as the main contribution of the Copenhagen School to security studies. Regional security complexes are defined as groups of countries that possess a degree of security interdependence sufficient to both establish them as a linked set and to differentiate them from surrounding security regions (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 47-48). They shape a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 47-48).

A regional security complex involves, *inter alia*, three main concepts which are existential threats, security interdependence and patterns of enmity and amity. To present an issue as an existential threat is to say that: "If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because we will not be here or will not be free to deal with it in our own way)" (Wæver in Buzan et al, 1998, 24). In the



literature on security studies, references to an existential threat are called “securitizations”. An issue is “securitized”, in the words of Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, if it “is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” (Diez and Pia; 2010: 48). In an RSC, security interdependence means that security transformations in one unit of the complex affect the other units. This security interdependence is expected to be more intense among members of an RSC than between them and those outside of the complex (Buzan, 1991: 194-195). Within RSCs, patterns of enmity and amity must be traceable. Relationships between states can represent a spectrum from friendship or alliances to those marked by fear. According to Buzan, the concepts of amity and enmity cannot be attributed solely to the balance of power. The issues that can affect these feelings range from things such as ideology, territory, ethnic lines, and historical precedent (Buzan, 1991: 189-190).

Security orders within RSCs are driven to a significant degree by three explanatory variables: regional structure, regional power roles and regional power orientations (Frazier and Ingersoll, 2010: 731). Regional structure, which is driven from the way material capabilities are distributed among regional states, can arise in a unipolar, bipolar or multipolar form (Frazier and Ingersoll, 2010: 737). Regional powers may also take one of the roles of regional leader, regional protector or regional custodian. Regional powers that are leaders act to strongly influence RSC members to move in specific security policy directions. They are responsible for initiating agreements on policy, shifting the courses of other states, and leading the region toward preferences more compatible with their own. The regional custodian role places a regional power in the position of engaging in efforts to maintain and/or stabilize the current security order. This can include powers that actively deter challenges to the order within the region or actions that provide resources for the stabilization of security concerns. Regional protector implies that a regional power assumes



the burden of defending the area from external security threats. (Frazier and Ingersoll, 2010: 740-742).

The Persian Gulf is a place where all the mentioned components of a regional security complex are identifiable to a great extent. The sub-region consists of the six members of the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council plus Iran and Iraq which are all littoral to the Persian Gulf. All of these states interact with each other in security matters more than they do with other states (except the U.S.), thereby constituting what Barry Buzan has called a regional security complex (Møller, 2005: 11). The sub-region state actors have meaningful interactions with one another which have been marked by periods of friendship and hostility. Besides, due to socio-historical facts, these states are prone to common vulnerabilities which have made their security concerns similar to each other. This in turn has put their security calculations in a state of interdependence in a way that changes in any of the sub-system's security situation affect the others' security calculations as well.

At the most basic level, the structure of any international system is defined by the distribution of capabilities among its members. This structural formation in the Persian Gulf has come in the form of tripolarity where Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are the major players. Each has been able to extend its influence over other members of the system at various times; none is so powerful as to be able to control the politics and policies of the others (Gause, 2010: 6). In addition to indigenous actors, the Persian Gulf has been a ground for foreign forces presence as well. During the Cold War, both superpowers found the region extremely attractive due to its energy supplies and also geostrategic situation in world rivalries. Even after the collapse of the bipolar system, the region sustained its central position within the new strategy of the U.S. in shaping the new world order. By exercising control over the region, the United States found an effective leverage to choke its rivals' necks and to keep them under control.



All in all, the state actors of the Persian Gulf can be categorized to regional great powers, above all Iran and Saudi Arabia. Regional small powers: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE and external powers, above all, the United States (Møller, 2005: 10). Before 2003, Iraq was also a great regional power albeit effectively contained by the U.S. in the aftermath of the occupation of Kuwait in 1991. However, with the coalition forces' military operations in 2003, Iraq turned into a war-torn state which is still seeking domestic security and stability and hence is considered a playground for regional and international actors rather than being a significant player. The said big and small powers have not worked individually in the past decades and there have been lines of alignment among them which have circled around the strategy of 'containing revolutionary Iran'. The formation of the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 has been the most important action to make a unified bloc against Iran and since Iran's post-revolutionary regional approach to secure its ideational and also material interests came in collision with the United States' interests in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. also sided with the Arab states and introduced itself as an architect of the counter-Iranian bloc.

When it comes to regional roles, Iran has been traditionally taking the role of a regional protector; trying to prevent further extra-regional powers' involvement in security arrangements of the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has played role of a leader which in fact has not gone beyond the boundaries of the GCC. In the meantime, the United States once self-proclaimed global hegemony did not repeat itself in the sub-region. Since a state strives to be a hegemon because it views itself and others recognize it as such (Ringmar, 2002), lack of a consensus among regional actors about the United States long lasting presence in the region and most notably Iran's strong opposition can be seen as the root cause.

As an RSC, the Persian Gulf threat perceptions are driven by two categories of threats. The first is power capabilities – the military



strength of neighbors. The second category is threat to the domestic security and stability of the ruling elite (Gause, 2007). In relation to the threats emanating from the outside, we argue that the lack of state-to-nation balance is a major source of tension and conflict in the Persian Gulf. The state-to-nation balance refers to the degree of compatibility or agreement between the existing division of a region into territorial states and the national aspirations and political identifications of the people in the region (Miller, 2005: 233).

The state-building process in the region has been articulated by the foreign forces and, in several cases, the borders drawn by them do not reflect the demographic and historical realities of the region. The borders of the modern Middle East region –in a broader perspective - were drawn up by the victorious powers of the First World War, as laid out in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement (Sørli, Gleditsch and Strand, 2005: 146). This has left several sources of potential conflicts between states of the Persian Gulf. Iraq has ongoing territorial disputes with Kuwait. The border between Iraq and Kuwait has caused friction between the two nations as far back as 1962 because of Iraq's claim to the whole of Kuwait. Borders on the Arabian Peninsula are widely disputed. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have a longstanding border dispute. Saudi Arabia and Yemen also lack a demarcated border and both covet the disputed areas particularly because of expected oil deposits (Kemp, 1995: 20- 21). One has to also bear in mind that one of the major factors driving the decline at the global level in interstate war since the middle of the twentieth century – the fact that acquisition of territory is no longer an efficient way to increase a country's wealth - does not apply in the region. This is because if a country acquires territory with oil underneath it, the national wealth can vastly increase (Gause, 2007).

In addition to the external threats, the Persian Gulf states – and the Arab ones in particular - have to deal with threats emanating from the unfinished process of nation-building. The concept of nation has been an imported good for the countries of the region and, since their



inception, the local states have been trying to integrate and/or assimilate the populations under their control. The borders being artificially designed along with the new demographic mobilization stemming from industrial and economic policies of the Persian Gulf states have made their populations extremely heterogeneous. Cordesman estimates that foreigners make up 50-60 percent of the total population in Kuwait, 38 percent in Bahrain, 41 percent in Saudi Arabia and 78 percent in Qatar (Cordesman, 1999: 8). Moreover, the current ethnical and religious tensions in the region are reflective of the fact that ethno-religious divisions are yet to be fully addressed and will constitute sources of tension in the years to come.

The nature of the region's political systems, which are mostly monarchical and restrict the circle of political power competition to a very narrow margin of their population, is another source of tension. The rigid structure of power with no opportunity for elite circulation has always guaranteed the existence of potential forces who challenge the totality of these systems. The emergence of the so-called Islamic Awakening has to be attributed, to some degree, to the growing tension between the royal families and those outside the power elite. These realities make the monarchical states prone to public importation of emancipatory concepts wherever it comes from.

As Buzan puts it, 'the Middle East is a place where an autonomous regional level of security has operated strongly for several decades' (Buzan and Wæver, 2003:189). In the sub-regional Persian Gulf, this security autonomy is translated into real security interdependence due to geographical adjacency. According to Lake and Morgan, when conflict among some members of an RSC affects other members, the conflict is regional (Lake and Morgan, 1997) and this has proven to be the exact case in the Persian Gulf. However, the security interdependence in the sub-region has been hardly positive. The region has, so far, pursued zero-sum logic with increase in the security of one state leading to insecurity of others. This has been, to a large part, due to involvement of big powers in security



arrangements of the region. In fact, the Middle East has been bereft of a locally designed security system which fits the indigenous necessities and meets the needs of local actors.

The area has always been coveted by non-indigenous actors. The Portuguese presence in the region was followed by a lasting British dominance, which, in turn, would be dislodged by American military, political, cultural, and economic leadership (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999: 298). The Persian Gulf has been a commercial and strategic asset to outside powers for many centuries and its linkage with the wider world extend back into late-antiquity and the pre-Islamic period (Ulrichsen, 2007: 17). As Nonneman argues, the projection of external political and military power has been a recurring feature ever since the arrival of the Portuguese expedition at Hormuz in 1507 (Nonneman, 2000: 107-115). However, it was the British interlude that laid the foundations for the evolution of the modern security system in the Persian Gulf. This formative period encompassed the transformation of the traditional Arab sheikdoms into proto-state entities. It led to the embedding of the principal of the external security guarantee in the security calculations of the Arabian Peninsula states (Ulrichsen, 2007: 19).

The presence of foreign forces in the region continued after the British departure in 1971 in the form of indirect intervention through the Eisenhower doctrine, which favored regional states seeking financial and political support from the United States with the aim to prevent a Communist takeover and Nixon's twin pillar doctrine, placing the responsibility of regional stability and security on the shoulders of the two regional powers of Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the insertion of the United States as the most powerful regional actor after 1990 further destabilized and imbalanced the regional security system (Ulrichsen, 2007: 22). The Iranian revolution, however, brought an end to this security arrangement, and after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, turned into the strategy of dual containment based on U.S.-GCC cooperation and exclusion of Iran and Iraq. The



dual containment could not address the central challenges of creating a sustainable regional order since it was based upon American refusal to accept Iran or Iraq. In response, the Iranian side also insisted on its principal position that withdrawal of external troops is a *sine qua non* of any security agreement in the Persian Gulf. All in all, since it was exclusionary, the U.S.-brokered security arrangements could not address the security needs of the sub-region.

II- The Impact of The Arab Revolutions

For almost two generations, waves of democratization have swept over most regions, from southern and eastern Europe to Latin America, from East Asia to Africa, but not the Middle East. There, tyrants had closed up the political world and become owners of their countries in all but name. Arabs had started to think they are cursed, doomed to despotism (Ajami, 2012: 56). However, at last, a series of tsunamis hit this region as well and casted aside autocracies that had lasted for decades. A combination of unmet political and economic demands inspired by Islamic causes founded the cornerstones of the revolutions. In spite of having common causes, the revolutions ended up with varying results.

In Tunisia, the neglected rural populations finding cause with a once powerful but much repressed labor movement ignited the revolution which within a few weeks overthrew the Ben Ali regime. In Egypt, it was the urban and cosmopolitan young people in major cities who organized the uprising, and after the military's defection from the Mubarak regime, picked the fruits of their revolution (Anderson, 2011: 3). In the third case, the Libyan rebels also succeeded in overthrowing the Gadhafi regime, albeit in a different form. There, the uprising was characterized by sectarian and tribal divisions which took the shape of a civil war between the bands supporting the Gadhafi stronghold in Tripoli and the tribal unions managing to take control of eastern provinces.

Keeping all the differences in mind, in the said three cases,



people managed to bring about a full-fledged revolution with tangible results at the end of the day. However, there remains other instances with partially satisfying democratic achievements. In Morocco, for example, King Mohammed's initiation of a set of constitutional reforms saved the government from falling into the hands of revolutionaries. In Yemen, a GCC-led initiative for political transition (Fernando, 2012) and President Saleh's subsequent transfer of power to his vice president (Fahim, 2011) helped the country out of crisis.

At the end of the line, there are also cases of failed revolutions. In Bahrain, although the majority of the population were voicing their demand for the Al Khalifah regime's departure from power, the state's suppressive measures accompanied by foreign military aid proved efficient in pushing the revolutionary waves back. The fact that transnational radical groups have engaged in the clashes (Lendman, 2012) has turned the Syrian battlefield into a critical matter of international security with no immediate light at the end of the tunnel.

The said upheavals sent shockwaves to the Persian Gulf from its very early days and popular unrest reached the Persian Gulf shores soon. Since then, the sub-region has undergone major changes; however, the basic regional characteristics and the rationales directing the political and security moves of the sub-regional states have remained untouched. Before getting into the impact of the Arab revolutions on the Persian Gulf sub-region's dynamics, it should be borne in mind that trends being shaped in the region in the course of decades cannot be reversed overnight. Hence, there are persisting elements surviving alongside those being subject to change. In the remainder of the article, the impact of the revolutions on the Persian Gulf with regard to the same indicators the sub-regional security complex has explored in the pre-revolution period is explored.

As discussed earlier, the security structure of the Persian Gulf is multipolar and marked by a power restraining power order, a result of decades of interactions among regional actors and external powers that seek to guarantee their strategic interests. The regional structure



by which we address distribution of power among actors and also the logic of action has been persistent; the Persian Gulf is still a multipolar sub-region and the driving rationale of the regional actors is still balance of power. However, the traditional alignments are now in flux and the regional power configuration has started to change.

The revolutions have also affected the traditional role played by the sub-region powers and, in a case by case basis, have pushed them either towards gripping their past roles or revising them. Saudi Arabia, for instance, 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 (Kamrava, 2012: 96). The country is playing role of a custodian more than any time before. The measures taken in 2011 and 2012 by the Saudis have been all with the aim to sustain the present regional order both internally and externally.

Qatar has also introduced itself as a key regional actor. The Arab upheavals have provided a ground for this oil-rich sheikdom to expand its influence throughout the region. With new activism in the policies of Middle East, it seems that Qatar is departing from the survival-oriented policy of the past and is more inclined towards assertion and taking the role of a regional leader. Benefiting from enormous oil revenues and relative domestic stability, Qatar seems to play an important role in regional dynamics, at first glance, disproportionate to its share of regional power. By taking advantage of its media dominance in the Arab world, Qatar has tried to direct public opinion to the advantage of revolutionary forces of outside the Persian Gulf and the state in the Persian Gulf region. However, putting all elements of power together (i.e., military capabilities, population and territorial size) the sheikdom is far from being able to play the role of a leader in the long run. Qatar has traditionally followed a pragmatic policy aimed at guaranteeing its survival. In doing so, the country has maintained good relations with both



regional and international powers. This new assertion in foreign policy posits the country at the edge of losing the said delicate balance it has maintained during the past decades.

Iran, however, has sustained its protector role. Characterizing the Arab upheavals as an 'Islamic Awakening', Iranian policymakers started to support indigenous and genuine democracy-seeking revolutionary movements and at the same time tried to keep it away from extra-regional influences. In both cases inside and outside of the Persian Gulf region, Iran kept insisting on its traditional position against any intervention of intrusive forces. The most apparent examples of this position are NATO's attacks on Gadhafi's forces in Libya in support of the opposition and the ongoing debate over possible military intervention in Syria. During NATO's military operations in Libya, Iran condemned any military activity of NATO in this country at the highest official levels and expressed its grave concerns about such interventionist measures (CNN, 2011). In the Syrian case, Iran has also been in the counter-interference front.

The recent developments in the Arab world have affected regional alignments. Perhaps the most important change in the conflict-cooperation pattern of the sub-region is the intensification of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two years experiences of the new Middle East have proven that the Arab revolutions have breathed new life into the three-decade long competition between the two countries. The Egyptian revolution which started in January 2011 and bore fruit one month later with Mubarak's overthrow was the first blow to the Persian Gulf alignment's configuration. The fall of the Mubarak regime took one of Saudi Arabia's levers on Middle Eastern politics. Egypt had been long regarded as a powerful Arab state that initiated Israeli recognition in the Arab world and counterbalanced Iran and its regional allies. But the recent change in the country's political structure makes it most likely that it will revise its regional foreign policy. Although Egypt's dramatic reversal of its regional policies is unlikely due to the persistence of the military as a



stable column of power and the country's economic dependence on the outside world. However, some changes in its relations with Israel and Iran are already in the horizon.

For the Saudis, all these developments were predictable before the revolutionary waves swept over Egypt and they were too transparent in their efforts to prevent it. Operating under the assumption that financial strength might save the Mubarak regime from its impending collapse, 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 (Kamrava, 2012: 96). However, after the will of the Egyptian nation was dictated to them, the Saudis resorted to other measures with the aim to direct the domestic developments of Egypt to their advantage. The four billion dollars in financial aid granted to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces in May 2011 (Ennahar online, 2011) was in pursuit of the blank cheque diplomacy to influence Egyptian orientations during the critical transitional phase the country is passing through.

Another field of conflict of interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran is in Syria. During the previous years and especially with the demise of Hafez Assad and Bashar's taking his mantle, there has been close cooperation between Iran and Syria, constituting the cornerstones of the 'Axis of Resistance'. Due to its proximity to Lebanon and closeness to Iran's allies in Palestine, Syria has been regarded as a strategic asset for Iran. For its part, Iran has always been a reliable strategic ally for Syria, backing its international positions against Israel. This partnership has come at the expense of Saudi Arabia's influence in Syria and drove it to strive to distance the Assad regime from Iran. However, the Arab uprisings have changed the playground, and motivated by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's success, Saudi Arabia's potential allies (i.e. Syrian Sunni opposition) came to action once again after years of dormancy caused by the failure of anti-regime activism of 1970s and early 1980s. During the protracted conflict with the government, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have



openly advocated for armed support to Syrian rebels, hoping that the overthrow of the Syrian government would empower Syrian Sunnis and break Syria's alliance with their rivals in Iran (Sharp and Blanchard, 2012: 12). The result of the ongoing Syrian crisis is of vital interest for both Iran and Saudi Arabia and will solve another piece of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry puzzle.

Besides developments in Egypt and Syria, the rise of Qatar is another new factor that jolts the current changing Persian Gulf patterns of rivalries. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are concerned about Qatar's new approach to regional affairs. For Iran, Qatar's growing influence in Egypt is counterproductive and stymies Iran's efforts to close ranks with Egyptian Islamists. Qatar's increasing involvement in Syria's crisis is similarly irritating for Iran; assistance of any kind to the Syrian opposition is condemned by Iran on the grounds that it further complicates the already intricate security landscape. When it comes to the Saudis, Qatar's ascendance on the ladder of the regional power echelon is similarly threatening. Although, for the time being, Saudi Arabia is benefiting from Qatar's activism in containing forces of change, it is only a matter of time before Saudi Arabia will stop sharing regional power with Qatar. The two countries already have divergent interests in particular scenes. In Egypt, while Qatar is standing with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudis are taking the side of the military establishment. During the upcoming domestic rivalry over power in Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia will face difficulty in arriving at a mutually satisfying position.

Another consequential factor for the sub-regional alliance formation is the United States' setbacks in the Persian Gulf. As pro-U.S. Arab regimes stumble and fall, Washington's influence in the Middle East is on the decline (Inbar, 2012). Even though the dust is far from settling in the region, in Washington the picture is starting to become clear; the U.S. position in the region, an area of vital interest since the Second World War, has been weakened (Smith, 2009: 6). As Freeman argues, "self-determination is, by definition, rejection of



subservience. This means, among other things, that Arab rulers are considerably less inclined to do America's bidding than in the past. They start to do things they see in their interests even when these things are not in ours" (Freeman, 2011). The fact is that the revolutions put the foreign policy decision-makers in Washington in a state of hesitation and hard choice between proclaimed human rights and democracy promotion by supporting revolutions on the one hand and preserving their immediate materialistic interests on the other.

In practice, the United States has taken a middle of the way approach. During the developments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the Obama administration initially stayed at the sidelines and waited until the dust settled a bit to see whether the state or the opposition was gaining the upper hand. When the revolutions were reaching an irreversible point, the administration started to enter the scene by supporting the revolutionary forces. As a result, an atmosphere of uncertainty is created for the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in relation to their dependency to the United States; i.e. their old ally is starting to be viewed as less dependable. This, in addition to the previously mentioned developments, has contributed to the weakening of the GCC-U.S. front which was primarily shaped to contain Iran.

The Arab upheavals' consequences for the security calculations of the Persian Gulf countries have to be explored in relation to their perception of threat as well. Long preoccupied with regime security in both domestic and foreign policy pursuits, 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 crisis (Kamrava, 2012: 96). The sudden and unpredicted revitalization of activism in Arab societies has shifted the origin of the threats their leaders perceived from those emanating from outside to internal ones.

Arab rulers used to conduct their national security strategies with regard to deterrence and counterbalancing state adversaries.



Massive arms imports and enormous expenditures in providing state of the art arms has been the cornerstone of their national security strategies. GCC countries, for instance, used to divert public attentions from domestic tensions by underscoring alleged Iranian adventurism in the Persian Gulf. The UAE in particular found the dispute over the three disputed Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf as an instrument for time to time calls for U.S. security guarantees. Bahrain, for its part, used to point the finger of blame to Iran when confronting domestic crises emanating from discriminatory policies against its majority Shi'a population.

However, with the coming of the Islamic Awakening, the traditional modes of thinking about security have changed and once outward-looking policy-making has shifted into an inward-looking one with emphasis being placed on curbing the forces of change from the inside. The popular uprisings in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Oman proved that the sources of tension are quite societal and foreign actors' measures are marginal, if any. An apparent example in this regard is Bahrain; while the genuine anti-government protests were severely suppressed by military and security forces backed by Saudi Arabia's military intervention, Iran was on the sidelines and did not interfere and the claims of uprisings being influenced by Iran were never substantiated. At the end, while the Bahraini government and its Saudi ally appeared as sinful and anti-democratic, Iran had the moral high ground with no intervention other than condemning the brutality against the Bahraini people.

The changing dynamics in the Persian Gulf has affected the security calculations of all regional actors in a way that their fate is tied to one another more than any time before. This security interdependence has been most visible among the GCC members. While attempts at economic integration among these states failed, the recent revolutions in the Arab world have breathed new life into the organization (Teitelbaum, 2011: 2). The six nations now share a policy of social control built on the triad of tradition, cronyism, and



exclusion (SOUAIAIA, 2011).

The GCC's most prosperous and powerful states, which have been effective in engulfing their own opposition, have played a pivotal role in tightening security ties within the bloc. In the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, warned by possible domino effects, these countries have tried to shore up their less stable, weaker allies, most notably Oman and Bahrain. In an attempt to help the governments of these two countries to manage their internal crises, the GCC has granted them loans of \$ 20 billion (Hamid, 2011). In line with the financial assistance, the GCC has also supported the security apparatuses of these two countries to suppress public demonstrations. This has been materialized through the reviving of the GCC military force, known as the Peninsula Shield force. Moreover, the Arab sheikhdoms have not shied away from sending troops to Bahrain to suppress the opposition there. In the midst of internal conflicts in Manama, the United Arab Emirates sent some 500 policemen to help what it called "defuse tension," in Bahrain (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2011).

Buttressing the monarchical system has been the core idea driving the GCC members towards more convergence. Generally speaking, the Arab upheavals brought an important faultline in the Arab world to the surface: monarchical vs. republican modes of governance and they have proved that monarchies are more resilient than their non-monarchical Arab counterparts (Lynch, 2012). Some has gone as far as to argue that in an era of revolutionary turmoil, perhaps monarchical rule provides the safest path for autocratic perpetuity (Yom, 2012). Although this may seem as a hasty conclusion and judgment about the monarchical resilience needs closer inspection, we can confidently say that under the present circumstances, the only system that remains, and that has emerged as the transnational unifying force of the GCC, is the monarchical system. The recent green light given to Morocco and Jordan to be accepted by the organization (Hamdan, 2011) after long-time neglect of their accession bids, which is an indication of the formation of a



unified monarchical bloc not only in the Persian Gulf but also in the wider Arab world, has to be understood against this backdrop. By doing so, the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf send a signal to their internal and external adversaries that they are determined to protect the status quo in the face of shifting alliances brought about by regional developments.

Conclusion

The Arab revolutions have brought about important changes to the Persian Gulf as a sub-regional security complex. Although the sub-regional structure is still multipolar, the old alignments are now in flux. The downfall of the Mubarak regime and its replacement with an Islamist government has weakened Saudi Arabia's position in its regional rivalry with Iran. The yet unclear result of the Syrian crisis, which has turned into a bitter civil war, will further determine to whose side the pendulum of Iran-Saudi rivalry will swing. Qatar's activism in the Middle Eastern security arrangements is another new phenomenon. If the current trends in Qatar's approach to the region continue, the GCC is likely to head towards a division between Qatar and Saudi Arabia which will weaken the GCC-U.S. bloc further. Moreover, the GCC in general and Saudi Arabia in particular have to deal with a less dependable United States. Washington's middle of the way approach during the Arab upheavals is putting its reliability under questioning by the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, particularly considering the course they are likely to go through when the waves of revolutions hit their shores. The roles regional powers used to play are also affected. Saudi Arabia, the big brother in the GCC, is now custodian of the Arab governance traditions more than any time before.

The revolutions have also changed the sources of threat felt by Arab rulers. Since most Arab states of the Persian Gulf share democracy deficit with the departed regimes, they are wary of their own internal weaknesses more than any threat posed by foreign



actors; once outward-looking security discourse is now changed for an inward-looking one. Iran's apparent non-involvement policy during the unrest in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia has driven the old Arab tactic of attribution of their domestic challenges to alleged Iranian interventionism obsolete. As another result of the Arab upheavals, the security interdependence in the Persian Gulf is tightened. This has been most obvious within the GCC. It turns out that the body is moving towards creating a more unified monarchical bloc in the Persian Gulf. This monarchical system is going to be not only more coherent but also enlarged. The steps taken in relation to the accession of Oman and Morocco to the GCC are to serve the said purpose.

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