CINZIA BIANCO

GARETH STANSFIELD

**TITLE: The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011.**

**ABSTRACT**

If shared security perceptions were the foundation of the GCC, 2011 might be analysed as the watershed year in which the GCC begun to fragment from within, as then the divergences between the countries' security perceptions became markedly exacerbated. It is commonly held that the threat posed to their security by Iranian intent and, at times, actions forced the countries of the GCC to be more aligned. However, the opposite seems to be the case, with both the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises being manifestations of conflicting security perceptions formed across the GCC countries in and since 2011. Through an in-depth analysis of the events and of the subsequent reaction of the GCC governments in terms of discourse and foreign policy, we can distinguish between three different categories of conceptualization. While the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE perceived domestic protests as an intermestic threat – triggered by the intersection between the international and domestic levels - the leaders of Oman and Kuwait conceptualised their protests as a manageable domestic insecurity, rather than full-fledged externally orchestrated events, arguably because they did not perceive a direct danger to their stability and legitimacy. Finally it can be argued that the government of Qatar did not see any real danger in the protests but instead view them as an opportunity to expand Doha's regional influence, arguably at Riyadh's expense. Unpacking what are the fundamental factors shaping such perceptions today would be the key to finding the appropriate framework for analysing GCC security in the future.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the summer of 2017, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), widely regarded as one of the most stable regional organizations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, was hit by the gravest crisis since its formation.[1] The crisis, whose prelude was arguably in 2014 and that is still unfolding in the winter of 2017, threatened the fate of the six-countries-bloc and, in that, was markedly different from recurring skirmishes of the past. The other main difference between past and present, would be that the crises of 2017 and 2014 have happened in the context of a reshuffled region, shook in 2011 by a multitude of events that put into question the political, economic and security dynamics at the domestic and regional levels, contemporarily. This article rests on the premise that the events of 2011 represented a watershed moment in the history of the GCC itself and strives to highlight the direct connections between that moment and the crises of 2014 and 2017. It argues that the recent crises have shown unequivocally how threat perceptions are increasingly divergent at the level of the GCC governments and that, while some divergences have clearly existed for decades, they surfaced predominantly in the context of the popular uprisings of 2011. It further argues that such divergences are rooted in tangible domestic factors – such as deep cleavages in the national fabrics, or dysfunctional socio-economic dynamics – as well as intangible factors - such as the country's collective memory, its ontological insecurity, and even leaders' individual perceptions. To do so, the article first explores the events of the 2017 crisis and their uniqueness, highlighting the positions of involved parties and those of regional and international key actors. What emerges as a distinctive feature in analysing such alignments is a growing fragmentation over the key issues that are addressed in the context of the crises. To analyse such issues, we look at the 2013 and 2014 Riyadh agreements, two documents that provide an official source for dissecting perceptions of threats and security in the monarchies and were referenced as key guidelines by the disputing parties in 2017. However, already in the analysis of these documents some incongruences emerge with the general conception about the GCC in the relevant academic literature. Such conception, though acknowledging the limits to GCC integration and coordination, rarely questions the existence of common threat perceptions. After a brief overview of the main literature, the article goes on to explain why we argue that instead such divergences can be directly related to the diverse character of the popular uprisings that took place in the GCC itself, and have since been growing. These differences have reverberated directly into conflicting conceptualization of the two main issues contested in the intra-GCC crises, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, in our conclusions, we advance an hypothesis on the evolution of threat prioritization in the region and some of the key implications for the GCC going forward.

---

[1] The Gulf Cooperation Council was formed in 1981 and it includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Kuwait and Qatar.

**1.0 THE GCC IN CRISIS.**

In May 2017, shortly after the United States' President Donald Trump left the GCC, where he travelled on his first state visit, the bloc plunged into the most serious internal political crisis in its 36 years of existence, featuring Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain - plus Egypt - against Qatar. It all started when, on May 24rd, Qatar News Agency (QNA) attributed controversial, conciliatory statements about Iran, Israel and Hamas to Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.[2] The same agency reported a decision of Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, to withdraw the country's ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE. Qatari officials quickly labelled these as fake news, and argued that QNA had been hacked. Nonetheless, these comments sparked a string of strong responses from Saudi and Emirati media, with editorials and articles attacking every policy choice made in Doha, in particular since the watershed year of 2011.[3] In particular, regional media levelled the grave accusations against Qatar of funding terrorist groups and colluding with Iran and Iranian-backed militias to undermine the stability of the GCC. In the definition of terrorist groups, the quartet and their state media included not only jihadist militias fighting in Syria holding ambiguous relations with Al Qa'ida affiliates, such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham[4], but also all groups affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed or designated as a terrorist organization by the quartet countries between 2013 and 2014.[5] The second major accusation, that of collusion between Qatar and Iranian-backed militias, was related by the *Financial Times* to a ransom deal paid by Qatar to free 26 members of a Qatari falconry party kidnapped in southern Iraq by an Iranian-backed Shia militia known as Kata'eb Hizbollah in April 2017.[6] Despite statements by Iraq's Prime Minister Hayder Al Abadi that the sum was received by the Iraqi government, and used in the rescue operations, regional government officials insisted that around $700m was paid both to Iranian figures and the Shia militias, and that

---

[2] "Qatari Emir: Doha has 'tensions' with the Donald Trump administration" *Al Arabiya English*, 24 May 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/05/24/Qatar-says-Iran-an-Islamic-power-its-ties-with-Israel-good-.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)
[3] Marc Jones, "Hacking, bots and information wars in the Qatar spat", in *The Qatar Crisis,* POMEPS Briefings #31, October 2017, pp. 8 -10.
[4] The group was previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra.
[5] Stig Jarle Hansen, "O Brotherhood, What Art Thou?", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-03-24/o-brotherhood-what-art-thou (accessed 20 July 2017)
[6] Erika Solomon, "The $1bn hostage deal that enraged Qatar's Gulf rivals", *Financial Times*, 5 June 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43?mhq5j=e1, (accessed 20 July 2017)

was a manifestation of Qatar's active collusion with forces aiming at the destabilization of the GCC monarchies.[7]

Such an unprecedented media and information offensive, that went as far as attacking the legitimacy of Qatar's Emir, was the early signal of just how unique this crisis was with respect to previous ones. For example the fact that the dispute played out in the public arena instead of closed-doors negotiations, signalled that the disputing parties were willing to cross what had been previously considered red lines. After weeks of such intense media offensive, on June 5 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt announced that they had cut all relations with Qatar and extended a boycott against the country. The quartet ejected Qatari diplomats, ordered Qatari citizens to leave their states within 14 days and halt all land, air and sea traffic with Qatar. This last measure was particularly dramatic given that the small country depends heavily on the globalised liberal economic order to survive, importing over 80 percent of its food consumption and exporting its main resource, energy.[8] This was, arguably, the second red line crossed and quite an effective device to show to Qatar's leadership that, in spite of its wealth and the political weight acquired through it, the Emirate remains a geographically small entity depending on its neighbours to thrive.

In the weeks after this initial move, the crisis underwent a significant escalation when the quartet issued a list of 13 demands for Qatar to meet within 10 days in order to resolve the dispute. The demands, from several parts defined 'draconian', included: curbing all ties except economic ones with Iran; severing all ties with individuals, groups or organisations that have been designated as terrorists by the quartet; shutting down al-Jazeera and other news outlets that receive Qatar funds; immediately terminating any joint military cooperation with Turkey; disclosing and halting all contacts with political opposition figures in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain, handing them over to the country of origin; paying compensation for losses caused by Qatar's policies; consenting to audits for compliance; aligning with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically.[9] While strongly calling for dialogue with its fellow GCC

---

[7] Mohammed Alyahya provides a helpful insight on Saudi Arabia's perspective in "The Rift with Qatar as Seen in Riyadh", a commentary published by *The Atlantic* on June 13, 2017, on http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-rift-with-qatar-as-seen-in-riyadh (accessed 8 January 2018)

[8] "Qatar food imports hit after Arab nations cut ties - trade sources", *Reuters*, 5 June 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-food-idUSL8N1J23IC (accessed 20 July 2017)

[9] Patrick Wintour, Qatar given 10 days to meet 13 sweeping demands by Saudi Arabia, *The Guardian*, 23 June 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/close-al-jazeera-saudi-arabia-issues-qatar-with-13-demands-to-end-blockade, (accessed 20 July 2017)

neighbours, Qatari leaders expressed firm rejection to the demands as soon as they were issued. [10] In search of indispensable support, Qatar's Foreign Minister quickly embarked in a diplomatic offensive in the West, subsequently internationalising a crisis that soon became relevant well beyond the borders of the Gulf region[11].

## 1.1 Internationalising the intra-GCC crisis.

Already in the early days of the crisis, Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani had visited the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, in Brussels and the German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, in Berlin.[12] Thorough June 2017, the Minister headed also to Italy and the United Kingdom. In all these stops, he rather openly leveraged the country's economic weight and its investments, to lure political leaders into supporting a mediated solution to the spat.[13] He found sympathetic reactions in those European countries that represented major destinations of Qatari investments, and whose leaders also often expressed a substantial interest in a general regional detente to kick-start economic cooperation with post-sanctions Iran. However, most European leaders, unwilling to alienate significant partners within the quartet, consolidated their position in a rhetorical - and rather inconsequential - support of the Kuwait-led mediation initiative.

Still, when on July 6 the Foreign Ministers of the quartet, meeting in Cairo, decided to prolong the boycott without applying the expected further escalation, that was interpreted as a result of international pressures for de-escalation. In fact, beyond Europe, also the United States' State and Defence Departments had voiced support for de-escalation, contradicting President Trump's support for the Saudi position. Already four days after the demands' publication, Minister al-Thani was in Washington D.C. meeting with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson who, together with

---

[10] "Qatar FM: Question mark over future of GCC after crisis", *Al Jazeera*, 6 June 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-fm-question-mark-future-gcc-crisis-170606001033685.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[11] The name of the region including the countries of the GCC, Iraq and Iran is at the centre of a political dispute. The region has been named Persian Gulf on almost all maps published until the 1950s. Since the emergence of Arab nationalism, the term started to be perceived as inappropriate by Arab leaders, who introduced the alternative name Arab Gulf, in turn considered offensive in Iran. In an attempt to avert controversies, this paper will refer to the region simply as the Gulf.

[12] "EU HR Mogherini meets Foreign Minister of Qatar", 9 June 2017, Newsroom, Council of the European Union website, https://tvnewsroom.consilium.europa.eu/event/eu-qatar-580f16be4153f-15668/eu-hr-mogherini-meets-foreign-minister-of-qatar-1780e; "Foreign Minister Gabriel after his talks with Qatari Foreign Minister Al-Thani", Press Release, Federal Foreign Office of the Republic of Germany, 9 June 2017.

[13] Qatar's Foreign Minister declared it during the event "The Crisis in the Gulf: Qatar Responds" held at Chatham House in London on 5 July 2017. See the full video at https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/crisis-gulf-qatar-responds (accessed 20 July 2017)

Secretary of Defense James Mattis, recognised the importance of the US-Qatar partnership for the American strategic interests and expressed commitment to promoting intra-GCC dialogue and resolution.[14] It was another unprecedented situation, whereby two US key members of an administration would publicly contradict their President, who, on social media, had expressed support for the measures taken against Qatar and hinted at a possible connection between the measures and his May 2017 visit to Riyadh.[15]

President Trump's visit to the Kingdom was in fact regarded as a watershed gesture to re-launch the partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia, strained under the previous American administration, led by Barack Obama.[16] Under President Obama, the United States' policy in the Middle East had alienated the Saudi allies, mainly due to the apparent support shown towards the Arab popular uprisings of 2011 and the signing of the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015. In particular, the abandonment of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's President since 1981, ousted by popular revolts, was considered a betrayal of one of America's closest ally in the region and aggravated by the, half-hearted, sympathy shown by the administration towards those taking the streets against the government in Bahrain. During the 2017 Riyadh Summit instead, President Trump expressed staunch support for the Saudi leadership of regional affairs thorough an alignment with Saudi regional policy and the perception of Iran as a hostile power.[17] Undoubtedly this support emboldened Saudi Arabia, as well as its closest GCC ally, the UAE, a country whose leadership developed direct contacts with the incumbent White House via the relationship between Abu Dhabi's Ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, and Trump's advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner.[18] These two countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, also appeared to be the driving forces behind the crisis, with the prominent role of the Emirati leadership slowly emerging as a credible idea. This latter idea was certainly held true by Qatar's Ministry of Interior, reporting that the

---

[14] About the Secretary of Defense's statements see "Mattis affirms US-Qatar cooperation: Pentagon", *AFP News*, 7 July 2017; see also Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis at a Joint Press Availability, Dean Acheson Auditorium, Washington, DC, 21 June, 2017, available at https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/06/272103.htm (accessed 20 July 2017).

[15] Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich. "Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?." *International Affairs* 93.5 (2017): 1013-1037.

[16] For a wider context on US-Saudi relations under the Obama administration, see Tim Niblock and Steven Hook (eds.) *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*. (Berlin : Gerlach Books), 2015.

[17] See "President Trump's Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit", Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, May 21, 2017, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/21/president-trumps-speech-arab-islamic-american-summit (accessed 20 July 2017)

[18] Simon Henderson, "Meet the Two Princes Reshaping the Middle East", *Politico Magazine*, June 13, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/13/saudi-arabia-middle-east-donald-trump-215254 (accessed 20 July 2017)

source of Qatar News Agency's hack had been traced back to the UAE, and was even hinted in the press by sources within the United States' intelligence community.[19]

As the fissure between the GCC parties involved in the crisis grew deeper, a substantial amount of pressure extended to those monarchies who tried to remain neutral and to other parties in the region. In fact, the fragmentation registered at the level of international politics vis-à-vis the management of this crisis is, arguably, a reflection of the deeper fragmentation within the GCC itself and the wider Middle East in the face of it.

**1.2 A fragmented region.**

Crucially, two GCC countries, Kuwait and Oman, didn't align with the anti-Qatar bloc. The Emir of Kuwait stepped forward on the same day that the crisis erupted to mediate among the parties and started shuttle diplomacy campaign between the GCC capitals. Kuwait's position appeared a product of its recent history, and the trauma suffered due to the invasion of a neighbouring country in 1990, and coherent with its geopolitical position, surrounded by either warring or failed states. In addition to that, Kuwait's diverse national fabric, including roughly 30% Shia citizens[20], and its dynamic political scene, that saw the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Hadas society performing well with rural and tribal voters, make the country vulnerable to sectarian or ideological tensions in the neighbourhood. Oman, on the other hand, remained mostly outside of the dispute and kept lines of dialogue open with all parties, consistently with its foreign policy tradition.[21] However, interestingly, Oman's State Minister responsible for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, went to visit the Qatari Emir in Doha on the same day that the crisis erupted.[22] In addition, Oman quickly opened up the use of its ports for vessels to and from Qatar, following the decision of the UAE to deny entry to its ports of Jebel Ali and Fujairah, the regional refuelling and bunkering hub.[23] Meanwhile, Oman's national carrier, Oman Air, launched additional flights to

---

[19] "Qatar presents proof of UAE role in QNA website hacking", *Gulf Times*, 20 July 2017, http://www.gulf-times.com/story/557315/Qatar-presents-proof-of-UAE-role-in-QNA-website-ha (accessed 8 January 2018); Karen DeYoung and Ellen Nakashima, "UAE orchestrated hacking of Qatari government sites, sparking regional upheaval, according to U.S. intelligence officials", *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2017.

[20] Data on the percentage of Shia in the GCC countries are not unequivocal and often contested. This percentage should be understood as approximate and is taken by: *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency website, available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook

[21] Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout. *A history of modern Oman*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[22] "Oman's foreign minister on a private trip to Qatar" *Times of Oman*, 6 June 2017, http://timesofoman.com/article/110636/Oman/Oman%27s-foreign-minister-on-a-private-trip-to-Qatar, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[23] Giorgio Cafiero and Theodore Karasik, "Kuwait, Oman, and the Qatar Crisis", Middle East Institute, 22 June 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/kuwait-oman-and-qatar-crisis (accessed 8 January 2018)

Qatar, as direct flights between Qatar and the four countries involved in the boycott were suspended, turning Muscat Airport in a regional hub for Qataris.[24]

Oman's position is overall particularly sensitive. As a long-standing GCC outlier, traditionally keeping cordial and collaborative relations with Iran and opting to remain neutral in Syria's and Yemen's conflicts, the country has unusually sparked controversy in the past couple of years. Muscat's decision to stay as clear as possible from the Qatar crisis might in fact play out into a context of existing tensions with Riyadh, dating back to the Sultanate's key role in mediating nuclear negotiations between the US and Iran, kept secret to all other GCC countries. For example, the Saudis and Emiratis had already accused Muscat in October 2016 of undermining GCC's collective security by not obstructing the smuggling of Iranian weapons to Saudi Arabia's enemies in Yemen, the Houthis, an accusation which Oman's Minister Yusuf bin Alawi vehemently denied.[25] Still, as the GCC state politically and economically closest to Iran, Oman arguably has grounds to suspect it might become a target of its GCC fellows in the upcoming future.

In the wider region, reactions to the intra-GCC spat also exposed a substantial fragmentation. In Qatar, the immediate reaction was to activate the safety mechanisms provided by the policy dubbed of 'omni-balancing': the idea that diversifying alliances away from the GCC umbrella and the United States, the traditional security guarantor of the region, would be necessary to ease dependence from Saudi and American hegemony.[26] Qatar resorted to Turkey to establish air bridges for food imports, and started transiting through Iran's air space and territorial waters for avoiding disruptions to its energy exports. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also expressed unconditional support for Qatar, asking and obtaining from its Parliament the right to deploy Turkish troops on Qatari soil, effectively preventing any hypothetical military escalation of the crisis.[27] The decision highlighted, and cemented, the strong political and ideological bonds between Ankara and Doha, institutionalised in bilateral agreements for security and defence cooperation

---

[24] Dominic Dudley, "A Winner Emerges From The Qatar Crisis: Oman's National Airline" *Forbes*, 8 June 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2017/06/08/oman-air-takes-advantage-of-qatar-crisis, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[25] Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons supply to Yemen's Houthis via Oman - officials", *Reuters*, 20 October 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[26] The concept is developed in Kristian Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.34.

[27] Bülent Aras and Pınar Akpınar. "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Qatar Crisis." *IPC Policy Brief* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, 2017).

signed between 2014 and 2016.[28] Being Erdoğan's Justice and Development party (the AKP) loosely affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood itself, the Turkish President regarded this crisis as the first phase in a larger offensive against political Islam spearheaded by the UAE, that he has blamed of being involved in the 2016 coup attempt against his government.[29]

On the other hand, Doha's policy of dialogue with Saudi Arabia's geopolitical competitor and neighbouring regional leader, Iran, appeared entirely pragmatic. On one hand, it paid off in terms of providing options to escape total isolation. Yet this apparent rapprochement between Doha and Teheran against Riyadh, if cemented, could represent a quite consequential development in the history of the GCC. As a matter of fact, in a classic mixing of defensive and offensive intentions characterising the security dilemma, such a rapprochement might even represent the *casus belli* to ultimately claim Qatar's intention to conspire with the common enemy.[30]

On the opposite front, the quartet received tepid support from several African and Middle Eastern countries including, most convincingly, from the Saudi protégé in Yemen, the government of Abd Al Mansour Al Hadi, and the Emirati's protégé in Libya, General Kahlifa Haftar, head of the Eastern government in the embattled country. The involvement of these and other regional players is not only a direct consequence of the rising role of the GCC countries in regional geopolitics, but also a sign of how the very issues at stake in the crisis are strictly related to the tectonic shifts that have taken place in the entire MENA region after 2011.

**1.3 The 2014 prelude and the issues at stake.**

After their July meeting in Cairo, the quartet stated that their main requirements, the list of demands, were already contained in documents that Qatar had signed in 2013 and 2014, namely the Riyadh Agreements, and that Doha should comply with.[31] Far from being a rhetorical device, the reference to such agreements arguably unveiled the weight and significance of those documents, that could be considered as cornerstones of recent intra-GCC relations. In fact the 2017 crisis cannot be separated from the intra-GCC spat unfolded four years earlier. In March 2014, Saudi

---

[28] The texts of the agreements were leaked and can be read in Paul Cochrane, "Revealed: Secret details of Turkey's new military pact with Qatar", *Middle East Eye*, 27 January 2016, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-qatar-military-agreement-940298365 (accessed 20 July 2017)

[29] Aras and Akpınar. "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Qatar Crisis."

[30] Fred H. Lawson "Neglected Aspects of the Security Dilemma." in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (Eds.), *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1993) pp. 100-126.

[31] "Qatar should commit to six principles", *Bahrain News Agency*, 5 July 2017, http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/792679#.WV1XMXHPIcY (accessed 20 July 2017)

Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, the same three actors involved in the 2017 crisis, took the unprecedented step of collectively withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar.[32] The action was taken in response to an alleged breach on the part of Qatar of a comprehensive security agreement dated November 23, 2013, signed by the King of Saudi Arabia, the Emir of Qatar and witnessed by the Emir of Kuwait. The document, named Riyadh agreement, lays out commitments to avoid "interference in the internal affairs of the GCC states, whether directly or indirectly, [including] not to give asylum/refuge or give nationality to any citizen of the Council states that has an activity opposes his country's regimes, and no support for antagonistic media".[33] It specifically mentions avoiding to support the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as opposition groups in Yemen that could threaten neighbouring countries.

The missing GCC Ambassadors returned to Doha in November 2014, eight months after their withdrawal, as Qatar's Emir Tamim signed a second security pact, known as the Supplementary Riyadh Agreement. This second document reinforced the points agreed upon in November of 2013: at a comprehensive read, the agreement's content can be summarised with the demand that Qatar aligned completely with the priorities and perspectives of the other monarchies, both at the level of GCC politics than at that of regional politics. For instance, it included also several detailed implementation and monitoring measures both related to GCC domestic affairs and to foreign policy, mentioning openly Syria, Yemen and "other disputed countries".[34] Further emphasis is then put on the necessity to sustain the stability and security of Egypt and to cease all media activity directed against the Egyptian government.[35] The Al Jazeera media network and its affiliates are directly mentioned and treated as one of the main foreign policy tools of the Qatari government, allegedly employed to disseminate the regime's pro-Islamist narrative, particularly in Egypt.

The Egyptian case was undoubtedly one of the major dossier of contention: in July 2013 Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had been at the forefront of supporting financially, logistically and politically a military coup against the elected government of Mahmoud Morsi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who had instead been backed substantially by Qatar.[36] Morsi's government

---

[32] Ian Black, "Arab states withdraw ambassadors from Qatar in protest at 'interference'", *The Guardian*, 5 March 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/05/arab-states-qatar-withdraw-ambassadors-protest (accessed 20 July 2017)

[33] The two documents, the 2013 and 2014 Riyadh Agreement were leaked to the press in July 2017. The CNN, which originally obtained the documents, has provided both the original Arabic versions and English translations at http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/07/10/translation.of.agreementsupdated.pdf (accessed 21 July 2017).

[34] See the 2013 Riyadh Agreement at at http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/07/10/translation.of.agreementsupdated.pdf (accessed 21 July 2017).

[35] Ibid.

[36] See Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 2014.

was ousted on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July in 2013, just a week after Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who had ruled Qatar since 1995, and had been the main architect of Doha's policy in support of Islamist groups in the region, abdicated in favour of his thirty-three-years old son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The diplomatic move against Qatar seemed an exploitation of the opportunity to pressure a young Prince into taking the distances from his father's maverick policies. As part of the deal, Qatar tried to establish some dialogue with the anti-Islamist military regime of Abdel Fatah al Sisi in Egypt and ejected a number of individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, including seven senior figures, to leave Doha.[37] Among them, there was the Brotherhood's acting leader, Mahmoud Hussein, Amr Darrag, the Brotherhoods's foreign relations officer, and Gamal Abdul Sattar, the former deputy head of Egypt's religious affairs directorate, all of them relocating to Turkey. Qatar also agreed to soften the tone of Al Jazeera in all reports that could damage the GCC regimes' interests and shut down completely Al Jazeera's affiliate in Egypt, Mubashir Masr.[38]

In addition to that, since 2014, Emir Tamim doubled down on his efforts to align his country's foreign policy with that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, chiefly in Syria and Yemen. In Syria, Qatar swayed his support most substantially to Saudi-backed opposition factions.[39] In Yemen, Doha joined the Saudi-led operations launched in March 2015 against the rebel force known as Houthis, viewed with sympathy in Iran, contributing financial resources and 10 fighter jets.[40] In addition, Qatar was among the founding members of a major Saudi project announced in December 2015: the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), an intergovernmental counter-terrorist alliance of Sunni countries in the Muslim world, aimed at showing Sunni unity under the Saudi leadership. Qatar also recalled its Ambassador from Tehran, in solidarity with Saudi Arabia, which cut ties with Iran following attacks on its diplomatic missions by Iranians protesting the execution by Riyadh's government of the Saudi Shi'a cleric and opposition leader Nimr al-Nimr. Amid this background, when carrying on with independent foreign policy projects, the Qatari leader did so with a "lower-key approach markedly different from the fanfare of his predecessor's high-profile forays into the regional arena." [41]

---

[37] For a comprehensive account of these circumstances see David B. Roberts "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring." *The Middle East Journal* 71.4 (2017): 544-562.
[38] Ibid., p.546.
[39] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Brief*, September 24, 2014, p. 6
[40] Adam Baron, "Qatar's Dispute with Neighbors Reverberates in Yemen" *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 19 July 2017, http://www.agsiw.org/qatars-dispute-with-neighbors-reverberates-in-yemen/ (accessed 21 July 2017)
[41] Ulrichsen, "Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications", 2014, p. 23

However, as evidenced by the subsequent, and graver, crisis erupted in 2017, these policy adjustments were considered far from adequate displays of commitment towards GCC unity. For example, crucially, Qatar never joined the Saudis and Emiratis in designating the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Doha continued to host and give a platform to prominent Brotherhood figures such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and other voices opposing the GCC regimes' narratives. As Qatar's Foreign Minister often declared, there would be no compelling reason to undertake any drastic, harsh measure against the Brotherhood, as the organization represents no threat to Qatar's security.[42]

This simple statement, in open contrast with the perspectives of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, arguably exposes the crux of the issue in the GCC discord: the existence of divergent and even conflictual security perceptions within the GCC. An indication to that might be even found in the same Riyadh Agreements. Indeed, the words obsessively reiterated in the few pages are 'security' and 'stability': the underlying idea of its proponents is that, at a time of vulnerability, Qatar has provided financial, logistic and political support - or simply airtime - to individuals or organizations threatening the security and stability of the GCC. However, interestingly, the deal was signed only by King Abdullah Bin Abdel-Aziz Al-Saud, of Saudi Arabia, King Hamad Bin Eissa Al-Khalifa of Bahrain, Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashed Al-Maktom, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, Mohamed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and Sheikh Tamim of Qatar.[43] No Omani officials signed the agreement, and similarly to what happened in 2017, Oman steered clear from the dispute altogether. The Emir of Kuwait did sign it, but was later identified as a neutral mediator in the dispute rather than an active signatory.

All this considered, from the perspective of researchers interested in this region, a long-term, crucial analytical question would be indeed whether, beyond the contingent questions raised most recently, there is a more comprehensive reading key, with deeper roots and long-lasting implications, to both the intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017.

## 2.0 CONTEMPORARY THREAT PERCEPTIONS IN THE GULF.

### 2.1 The GCC in the area literature: what kind of security organization?

---

[42] Mohammed Al-Sulaimi, ""We don't, won't and didn't support the Muslim Brotherhood," Qatar FM tells Arab News", *Arab News*, 17 May 2017, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1100781/middle-east (accessed 21 July 2017)
[43] See the 2014 Riyadh Supplementary Agreement at
http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/07/10/translation.of.agreementsupdated.pdf (accessed 21 July 2017).

Arguably, one of the most relevant analytical elements emerged in the context of both the 2014 and 2017 regional spats may be how increasingly security perceptions are diverging across the GCC, a body that, the general consensus goes, was formed on the basis of common threat perceptions. Most scholars indeed argue that the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 was directly aimed at common self-defence in the perilous context of the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the emergence of a revolutionary regime in Tehran intent on exporting its revolution to the neighbourhood and the subsequent outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980.[44] These events were perceived as threatening the very survival of the Gulf monarchies: by coming together, the six monarchies wanted to present something of a common front to common security needs. Indeed, in spite of recurrent skirmishes within the GCC, a common perception and prioritization of threats has almost never been questioned in the area literature. For instance, fast forward to contemporary scholars, challenging the idea of the GCC being tied together exclusively by the hegemonic diktats of Saudi Arabia, Matteo Legrenzi too argues that the inherent bond of the GCC alliance seems to be a common perception of threats and an obsession with stability.[45] In this sense, Legrenzi goes back to the realist interpretation of the GCC formation, predominant since Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory described the GCC as a balancing alignment "intended to limit potential pressure from both Iran and the Soviet Union."[46] Academics specialising in area studies often look at the security of the bloc of six Gulf monarchies as inextricably interdependent, almost a unitary good named 'Gulf security'. Similarly, in the face of the turmoil taking place in the wider region in 2011, it was argued and assumed that monarchies closed ranks and confronted collaboratively a common threat to stability, as if stability were identifiable in a common good.[47] This 'commonality' is something that the intra-GCC crises openly challenge.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the questions of the GCC's countries security are somehow more comprehensively answered if addressed at the supranational level. In fact, concepts of security complex, a geographic area in which members invest most of their resources and attention on one another, or security community, i.e. a group of states sharing values, identities - and agendas - tied

---

[44] Among others, a careful account of the GCC's formation is in Abdulla, Abdul Khaleq. " The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature Origin, and Process." in *Middle East dilemma: The politics and economics of Arab integration* (1999): 150.

[45] Matteo Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economy Coordination in a Changing Middle East*. Vol. 44. IB Tauris, 2011.

[46] Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 270.

[47] See, for instance, Victor Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs," *Journal of Politics* 74, 3 (2012): 707-722; Sean Yom and F. Gregory Gause, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On," *Journal of Democracy* 23, 3 (2012): 74-88; and André Bank, Thomas Richter, and Anna Sunik, "Long Term Monarchical Survival in the Middle East: A Configurational Comparison, 1945-2012," *Democratization* 22, 1 (2015): 179-200.

together by supranational links and collective security mechanisms, are often employed. [48] Some scholarly works analyse the Gulf (the six Arab monarchies of the GCC, Yemen, Iraq, Iran) as a sub-complex from the larger MENA region and some even as a as a stand-alone regional security complex. [49] Among them, Gregory Gause configures a tri-polar system, pointing out that of the three major wars occurred in the region between the 1980s and the early 2000s, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were the fundamental players, either as combatants or as political actors, and that also the smaller GCC members devote most of their policy efforts to relations among themselves.[50] Gause, however, excludes Yemen and includes the United States as a member of the complex, with the caveat of a changing degree of involvement overtime, but still as a fundamental player in the security paradigm of the region. Kristian Ulrichsen instead differs from this perspective by excluding the United States and inserting firmly Yemen into the Gulf regional security equation.[51] On the other end of the spectrum, consistent part of the scholarship has argued that the GCC cannot be defined a full-fledged security community, as it lacks sovereign supranational security institutions and has developed a poor level of integration in security and defence policies.[52] Others have argued that the GCC can become indeed a security community, albeit a 'loose' or 'heterogeneous one', with a strong state-centric nature.[53] There is almost a general consensus in arguing that the body promoted economic integration and social exchange beyond anticipated expectations and thus strengthened links between economic and social actors.[54] Capitalising on existing transnational family and tribal kinship, it has provided its citizens with a rhetorical and an institutional alternative identity beyond that of the state, the 'khaliji' identity, that, according to

---

[48] The regional security complex theory first appears in Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991). The area studies literature has usually referred the concept to the whole MENA region. See: Halliday, Fred. *The Middle East in international relations: power, politics and ideology.* Vol. 4. Cambridge University Press, 2005; Hinnebusch, Raymond. *The international politics of the Middle East.* Manchester University Press, 2003; Lawson, Fred. *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World.* Stanford University Press, 2006. The definition of security communities has been forged in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, ed., *Security Communities*, Cambridge University Press, 1998

[49] The same Barry Buzan referes to the Persian Gulf as a sub-complex in Weaver and Buzan. *Regions and Powers.* Cambridge University Pres, New York (2003). Among the area scholars an example of this conceptualization is in Cilja Harders, and Matteo Legrenzi (eds). *Beyond Regionalism?: regional cooperation, regionalism and regionalization in the Middle East.* Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013.

[50] Gause III, F. Gregory. *The international relations of the Persian Gulf.* Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[51] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, Hurst & Company, 2011.

[52] See for example Neil, Partrick, "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?" Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper No. 19: London: London School of Economics, 2011

[53] Koch, Christian. "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization." Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *KAS International Reports* (2010): 24-35.

[54] This was, arguably, one of the early objectives of the bloc, as suggested in the work by Rouhollah Ramazani and Joseph A. Kechichian. *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Record and Analysis.* (University of Virginia Press, 1988). Achievements were noted repeatedly in the 1990s and the 2000s, i.e. by Fred Lawson in "Theories of integration in a new context: The Gulf Cooperation Council." *Racing to Regionalize: Democracy, Capitalism, and Regional Political Economy* (1999): 7-31; or by Matteo Legrenzi in "The Long Road Ahead: Economic Integration in the Gulf States." *Cooperation South* 2 (2003): 33-45.

many, could led to the formation of a full-fledged 'security community' in the future.[55] However, in this sense too the intra-GCC spat of 2017 represented a significant trend inversion. The substantial level of economic integration attained by the GCC became an enabling context for the diplomatic offensive, magnifying the effects of the quartet countries sealing their borders to Qatari goods, capitals and citizens. The vitriolic media campaign, quickly disseminated and inflated on social media, and the rapid surge of a vertical - top down - nationalism, would put into question the depth of the 'khaliji' identitarian bond. In addition, the expulsion of Qatari citizens and the introduction of restrictions on cross-border movements, pose serious questions on the long-term impacts of the crisis on the GCC social fabric.

As a matter of fact, all considered, many are the assumptions that might have to be put into question when looking at the developments taking place after the watershed year of 2011, and in light of the two intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017.

## 2.2 Year 2011: a turning point.

When the wave of popular turmoil that in 2011 shook the MENA region hit some of the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, considered islands of stability, it had transformative impacts on the interpretation of threats at the level of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Most of the literature dissecting such impacts argued that while at the regional level the GCC countries' response to the events of 2011 were markedly divergent, due to different calculus on opportunities versus risks, all of the Council's members closed ranks in a display of shared security priorities to push back against change when protests reached their own backyard.[56] However, in light of the discourse and politics on which the major intra-GCC crises have been based, new and structural questions emerge about the different conceptualisation of both the regional and domestic uprisings at the level of the GCC regimes. On the premise, grounded in years of scholarly analyses, that in the GCC there has been a progressive conflation of the concept of national security into that regime security, it is sensible to argue that the large scale protests happening in 2011 represented a point of maximum vulnerability for the affected GCC states.[57] However, what is at times overlooked is that the unrests *per se* were rather different.

---

[55] Michael Barnett, and F. Gregory Gause. "Caravans in opposite directions society, state and the development of a community in the Gulf Cooperation Council." *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* 62.1 (1998): 161-197."
[56] Daniel Odinius and Philipp Kuntz. "The limits of authoritarian solidarity: The Gulf monarchies and preserving authoritarian rule during the Arab Spring." *European Journal of Political Research* 54.4 (2015): 639-654.
[57] The conflation of the notion of regime security with national security has been explored, among others, by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism." In

For instance, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were invested by months-long sustained protests with a strong identitarian characterization. While initially involving citizens of different societal groups protesting against perceived socio-economic and socio-political discrimination, protests were localised in the Shia-majority areas, galvanised by Shia clerics, gathering the sympathy of Iran and strongly questioning the legitimacy of the ruling regimes.[58] These were the biggest rows of demonstrations witnessed since 1979–80, when the same communities, then inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution, revolted against the Sunni ruling families, leaving a long-lasting mark on the Saudi and Bahraini collective memory.[59] Both times, the opposition was characterised by the countries' leadership as un-Saudi and un-Bahraini, and labelled as Iran's fifth columns.[60] In 2011, the government deployed national security forces in Saudi Arabia, while a Saudi-led contingent of the Peninsula Shield – interestingly including only forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE - cleared protesters in Bahrain.[61] Protests were treated by the state as a domestic threat inspired by external forces outside of their control, or *intermestic* threat. Very similar was the framing and treatment of dissent from Sunni Islamists in the UAE. Although protests there were minimal - revolving around two petitions advocating for political reform - they were partly coordinated by activists connected to the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islah organisation and the authorities immediately accused them of conspiring with the Egyptian Brotherhood.[62] This connection may be attributable not only to the fact that the petitions signed were in line with some elements of the Brotherhood's beliefs on representative politics.[63] In fact, according to leaked U.S. embassy cables, already in 2009 and 2010 UAE government officials considered Islah members to be the "standard bearers for an essentially foreign ideology."[64] After the 2011 arrests, the UAE government consistently argued that al-Islah had pledged the oath of *bay'a* (loyalty) to the Brotherhood's General Guide in Egypt to further its

---

Fawcett L., (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); or by Pinar Bilgin. *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 2004).

[58] Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that wasn't*. Stanford University Press, 2013.

[59] Toby Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38 (2006), pp. 213–233.

[60] See for example Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11.3 (2011): 513-526.

[61] A comprehensive account of the 2011 events in Bahrain can be found in: Mahmoud Bassiouni, Cherif Rodley, et al (2011), *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, Manama, 23 November 2011.

[62] Abdelkhaleq Abdulla, *Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States* (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2012).

[63] Courtney Freer. "Rentier Islamism in the absence of elections: the political role of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates". *International Journal of Middle East Studies, 49*(3), 479-500.

[64] U.S. Embassy Abu Dhabi, "04ABUDHABI3210: Local Views on Prospects for UAE Democratization," 2004, http://cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=04ABUDHABI3210; U.S. Embassy Abu Dhabi, "04ABUDHABI4061: UAE Minimizing Influence Of Islamic Extremists," 2004, http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=04ABUDHABI4061.

pan-Islamist cause, establishing an Islamist state.[65] The fact that the bulk of Brotherhood activists were located in the poorer Northern Emirates and that there were rumours of an attempted ideological contagion of the group at the level of the ruling families in some of those Emirates, have arguably amplified Abu Dhabi's leaders already hyper-vigilant perception of the threat they represented to the integrity and functioning of the UAE Federation and Abu Dhabi's undisputed leadership of it.[66] The UAE response was uncompromising: to jail dozens of Brotherhood activists and launch an assertive region-wide anti-Islamist policy.[67]

By contrast, protesters didn't rally behind the flag of any group associated with a foreign ideology or movement neither during the large-scale protests taking place in Oman from January to May 2011, nor in the scattered rallies happening in Kuwait from August to December 2011. In Oman, protesters steered clear from any attack to the legitimacy of their ruler.[68] It was of interest that one of the largest-scale protests in Oman - allegedly gathering up to 10,000 people[69] - took place in the southern centre of Salahah, the epicentre of a 1960s leftist insurgency.[70] However, in spite of this heavy historical legacy, the characterization of protesters and their demands didn't offer hints of an insurgent project. Their demands were about creating jobs, increasing wages and welfare, tackling corruption, limiting the power of security institutions, further empowering the Majlis A'Shura.[71] The protests were described and treated as a fully domestic matter centred around socio-economic grievances: the fact that Omanis openly acknowledged the legitimacy of the Sultan in addressing these grievances highlighted the main distinctive feature of the Omani spring. In turn, the Sultan opted for engaging with protesters and addressing their grievances.[72] Relevant is the case of how Kuwait's authorities responded to their own public demonstrations against corruption, leading to the dramatic storming of the National Assembly in November 2011.[73] The Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed Al Sabah conceded the resignation of the much-criticised nephew, Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed Al Sabah, and called four elections in the period from December 2011 to

---

[65] Courtney Freer. "Rentier Islamism in the absence of elections: the political role of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates", p. 491.

[66] Interviews of the author, London, 18 July 2017.

[67] David B. Roberts, "Mosque and State: The United Arab Emirates Secular Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs*, 18 March 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-arab-emirates/2016-03-18/mosque-and-state, (accessed 27 June 2016)

[68] Sunil K. Vaidya, "Oman Protesters Apologise to Ruler," *Gulf News*, March 1, 2011, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/oman-protesters-apologise-to-ruler-1.769812. (accessed 21 July 2017)

[69] James Worrall. "Oman: The "Forgotten" corner of the Arab spring." *Middle East Policy* 19.3 (2012): 98-115, p. 101.

[70] Fred Halliday. *Arabia without sultans*. London: Saqi, 2013.

[71] Said Sultan al Hashimi, "The Omani Spring: Towards the Break of a New Dawn," *Arab Reform Initiative Brief*, no. 52 (November 2011): http://www.arabreform.net/spip.php?article5092.

[72] Worrall, "Oman: The "Forgotten" corner of the Arab spring."

[73] "Kuwait orders tight security after parliament stormed", *Reuters*, 17 November 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-protest-idUSTRE7AF2RL20111117, (accessed 27 June 2017)

November 2016. While on one hand the resulting power fight between the Islamist-led opposition, the rulers and pro-government groups resulted in a political paralysis, elections arguably served as effective avenues to channel popular grievances. Interestingly, the other string of protests taking place in Kuwait in 2011, those led by the bidoons (or stateless, from the Arabic "bidoon jinsiyya", "without nationality") were instead met with a heavy-handed response by the security forces.[74] Amid suppression, the authorities responded to their protests against systemic economic and political marginalization and demand to receive citizenship, by pushing the bidoons to provide proof of their original - read foreign - roots, and finally planning to offer Comoros citizenship. The presence of a large community of bidoons - estimated 80,000-120,000 - clearly seems perceived by the leadership as a socio-political and socio-economic vulnerability.[75] In a country of 1.2 million citizens, adding 100,000 citizens, with all the subsidies and welfare entitlements, could have a toll on the public finance whose status already pushed citizens into the streets, and perhaps even alter the delicate sectarian balance of the national fabric, and political equilibrium in elected institutions.

## 2.3 The Qatari exception and the Muslim Brotherhood.

With one of the smallest and wealthiest population in *per capita* terms, and a homogeneous national fabric, Qatar was the only GCC country not to witness any significant protest in 2011 and, thus, not to experience the domestic or *intermestic* threats that the other GCC leaders endured. In fact, where the other GCC states arguably saw a threat to their regime's stability, fuelled by the success of upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, in a region where borders are porous and ideas transnational, Doha's leaders saw an opportunity.[76] Al Jazeera, particularly in its Arabic version, rode the wave of popular mobilisation, providing a region-wide platform to anti-regime activists' testimonies and ideas everywhere in the region. While Al Jazeera Arabic didn't devote the same enthusiastic coverage to revolts in Bahrain, Al Jazeera English produced and broadcasted in August 2011 a controversial documentary about the crackdown of protests in the island kingdom, titled "Shouting in the Dark", that was allegedly withdrawn after protests by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.[77] Crucially, Qatar's leader, perceiving no threat to his political stability, looked at the ousting of old regimes and the rise of new political actors as an opportunity to expand his political network and influence. Through the long-standing relations that the Qatari regime had developed with senior Brotherhood

[74] Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Kuwait's bidoon may still be in limbo', The National, 1 April 2013, available at: http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/kuwaits-bidoon-may-still-be-in-limbo

[75] Jane Kinninmont, "Citizenship in the Gulf," The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings, ed. Ana Echagüe, (Madrid: FRIDE, 2013), p. 57.

[76] David B. Roberts "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring."

[77] Brian Stelter, "Al Jazeera Changes Plan to Rerun Documentary", *The New York Times*, 9 August 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/10/world/middleeast/10jazeera.html (accessed 21 July 2017)

figures based in Doha, it could reach out directly to the rising groups in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, channelling support, engaging in a dialogue and building convergences with those groups who, elected into government in late 2011 and 2012, seemed in the position to shape the region's future.

This was a unique opportunity for then Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani who, since deposing his pro-Saudi father Sheikh Khalifa in 1995, and escaping an attempted counter-coup supported by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and had devoted his efforts to disenfranchising Qatar from Riyadh's hegemonic control.[78] In order to do so, Sheikh Hamad had invested in his country's gas resources in a large-scale operation to build international legitimacy, independent from the Saudi aegis, that started with creating a global satellite network in 1996, Al Jazeera.[79] Benefitting from the oil prices boom of the early 2000s, Sheikh Hamad doubled down on his efforts, by investing surpluses from oil revenues into strategic assets around the world that created an internationally recognisable brand for Qatar. Financial resources were also instruments in a diplomatic offensive, dubbed *riyal-politik*, that allowed Qatar to broker high-profile deals in the first decade of 2000 between Lebanese factions, Palestinian's parties Hamas and Fatah, Darfur rebels and the Sudanese governments and the Houthi rebels with Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh. Arguably the entire reign of Skeikh Hamad, with these operations, was aimed at consolidating the international legitimacy of Qatar, clearly distancing it from Saudi Arabia's grip. Qatar's post-Arab Spring strategy in the region, built in strategic coordination with Turkey's Islamist ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), represented the final consolidation of this idea.

The strategy was directly in contrast, on the ground, with that of the UAE, supported by Saudi Arabia, backing those anti-Islamist factions actively fighting Qatar-backed groups in the region. However, although the Brotherhood has been since 2014 in the list of terrorist groups in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the issue of how to define and manage the regional constellation of groups inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood has consistently been marred by continuous changes and contradictions. As mentioned, the Brotherhood is anathema to the UAE's leadership,  who accused Doha of shoring up the very factions providing ideological inspiration to opposition groups in the Emirates. On the other hand, the current leadership of Saudi Arabia had developed since 2015 a working relation, perhaps aimed at co-optation, with key figures from the Brotherhood's regional affiliates - including Rachid al-Ghannouchi of Tunisia's Ennahda Party, Abdul Majeed al-Zindani

---

[78] "Life sentences for Qatari coup plotters", *BBC*, 19 February 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/660887.stm (accessed 21 July 2017)
[79] A complete account of Sheikh Hamad's rule in Qatar can be found in Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 2014

of Yemen's al-Islah, and Hammam Saeed of the Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood. Under King Salman, Saudi Arabia also hosted the International Union for Muslim Scholars, headed by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric naturalised in Qatar and major ideologue of the Brotherhood, for the Islamic Conference convened in February 2015.[80] Earlier that same month, then Saudi Foreign Minister Saud bin Faysal even stated that his government had "no problem with the Muslim Brotherhood".[81] Still the group's ideology has served as an inspiration to a group involved in contesting the Kingdom's rulers Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyya.[82] Finally, factions that can be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood sit in Parliament in Bahrain, where the group al-Minbar shows convergence with the ruling regime, and Kuwait, where the Brotherhood's political wing, Hadas, scored a substantial electoral result in 2016.[83] Arguably, such divergences are crucial not only to explain the different policy choices of the monarchies in the period from 2011 to 2017, but also to inform anticipations of their expected behaviours in the short and medium term.

## 2.4 (Un)common perceptions about Iran

After 2011, the perception that GCC-based Shia groups were linked to Iran emerged as the main threat to regime stability in the political discourse in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Pointing to the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, the Saudi and Bahraini leadership argued that, since 1979, Iran was after the destabilization of the entire region, including the GCC, to establish a foothold in regional politics.[84] Riyadh feared a replication of the Iraqi case where Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003 expanded and consolidated Tehran's influence through Shiite parties with a history of close relations with the Islamic Republic, including Dawa and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. The latter, a Shiite Islamist faction originally known as the Supreme

---

[80] "Saudi king hosts Muslim scholars close to Brotherhood", *Middle East Monitor*, 24 February 2015, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150224-saudi-king-hosts-muslim-scholars-close-to-brotherhood/ (accessed 20 July 2017)

[81] Mary Atkinson, "Saudi Arabia has 'no problem' with Muslim Brotherhood: Foreign Minister", *Middle East Eye*, 11 Febbraio 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-foreign-minister-no-problem-muslim-brotherhood-230201904 (accessed 20 July 2017)

[82] For a background on Islamist dissent in contemporary times in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, see Ingo Forstenlechner, Emilie Rutledge, and Rashed Salem Alnuaimi. "The UAE, the "Arab Spring" and Different Types of Dissent." *Middle East Policy* 19.4 (2012): 54-67; Stéphane Lacroix, Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States (2014), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/56725/1/Lacroix_Saudi-Islamists-and-theArab- Spring_2014.pdf

[83] For an overview of the Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain, see Ibrahim Hatlani, "Bahrain Between Its Backers and the Brotherhood." *Carnegie Endowment* (2014). About the Brotherhood's performance in the 2016 Kuwaiti elections see "Kuwait poll: Opposition wins nearly half of parliament", *Al Jazeera*, 27 Novmber 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/kuwait-poll-opposition-wins-parliament-161127060822207.html, (accessed 20 July 2017)

[84] Gause III, F. Gregory. "Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war." Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 11 (2014): 1-27.

Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), was even founded with the Tehran regime's backing in 1982 by Iraqi Shiites exiled in Iran aiming at overthrowing Saddam.[85]

These fears were aggravated by the news breaking in November 2013 that the P5+1 signed an ad interim agreement with Iran, the first breakthrough in decades of diplomatic isolation over Tehran's development of a nuclear energy programme. The announcement caused consternation and concern in most GCC states not only because the talks didn't address what they perceived as Iran's regional policy of destabilization, and because GCC representatives were not included in the discussion, but also because it emerged that one of the GCC states, Oman, had secretly been the key mediator of the talks between the United States and Iran since 2009.[86] Some of these concerns were voiced by Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief, who expressed skepticism over Iran's sincerity and criticized the P5+1 for not including the GCC states at the negotiating table.[87] When the final agreement was signed in 2015, he further protested that it granted Iran immediate political and economic status, allowing Iran time, space and additional financial resources to continue with its existing policy in the region. Soon after the deal was signed, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States and current Foreign Affairs Minister for the Kingdom, Adel al-Jubeyr, stated that his government's allies should continue to work to counter Iranian expansionism, terrorism and interference in the region. However, crucially, the normalization of Iran's regional status was not equally perceived as a threat across the GCC.

The Bahraini leadership sided completely with Saudi Arabia, continuing to emphatically accuse Iran of offering support and training to subversive Shia groups engaged in undermining the ruling regime.[88] The 2011 turmoil had revived in both countries memories from the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, when the revolutionary leader Ruhollah Khomeini launched a full-fledged rhetorical attack against the legitimacy of the al-Saud, encouraged GCC-based Islamist Shiite movements such as the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (IRO) to export the khomeinist revolution and even backed a failed coup aimed at toppling Bahrain's Al Khalifa royals in 1981.[89]

---

[85] Cinzia Bianco and Giorgio Cafiero, "Will Trump Take Seriously the Arab Gulf States' Concerns about Iran?", *Middle East Policy Council*, 22 December 2016.

[86] Riham Bahi. "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement." *The International Spectator* 52.2 (2017): 89-101.

[87] Steven Enlarger, "Saudi Prince Criticizes Obama Administration, Citing Indecision in Mideast" *The New York Times*, 15 December 2013.

[88] Simon Mabon, The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry, *Middle East Policy Council*, Summer 2012, Volume XIX, Number 2, http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/battle-bahrain-iranian-saudi-rivalry?print

[89] Tariq Alhasan, Hasan. "The role of Iran in the failed coup of 1981: the IFLB in Bahrain." *The Middle East Journal* 65.4 (2011): 603-617.

On the other hand, despite being targeted as well by Iranian-backed Shiite terrorism in the early 1980s, Kuwait had a markedly different reaction at the Iranian deal. Soon after the signing, the Emirate's Foreign Undersecretary Khaled Al-Jarallah declared to the state-run KUNA news agency that he hoped the deal would lead to a permanent deal to defuse tension and ensure regional security.[90] Such reaction could arguably be analysed predominantly in light of one, main, factor: that Kuwait's Shia minority had not been part of the protests in 2011 and had instead sided with the Al Sabah ruling family. The large Shia minority in Kuwait, mostly consisting of merchant families, has traditionally played an important role in the economic ecosystem of the country as well as in its parliamentary politics.[91] Since Iraqi forces retreated from the country in 1991, Kuwait's sectarian harmony has served as a linchpin of domestic stability. However, given the embroilment of the region into a sectarian conflict and the polarization of Iran-Saudi rivalry, such stability is shaky. Between 2015 and 2016, when Saudi Arabia cut relations with Iran after the sacking of its diplomatic missions, the sectarian temperature rose in Kuwait too. When Kuwait recalled its own Ambassador from Tehran, in solidarity with Riyadh, Shiite members of Parliament argued that Kuwait's action emboldened the Salafists who are said to be openly hostile to their community. On the other hand, in 2015 Kuwait's security forces arrested individuals allegedly connected to Iran and Hezbollah on charges of "spying for the Islamic republic of Iran and Hezbollah to carry out aggressive acts against the State of Kuwait" as well as a number of activists over online criticism against Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.[92] The terrorist attack of June 2015 conducted by a jihadi group affiliated to the Islamic State against Kuwait City's historic Shiite Imam Sadiq mosque represented one the most delicate moments for sectarian balance in the Emirate. Perceiving this risk, rather than the threat of Shia sedition perceived by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Kuwait's leaders have engaged in a balancing exercise with neighbouring Iran and Saudi Arabia.

An even more pragmatic approach to post-nuclear deal Iran was adopted by Dubai, for decades Iran's most important regional trade partner and Iran's main re-export hub from 2009 to 2012.[93] The Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum stated, after the *ad interim* nuclear agreement in November 2013 that: "Iran is our neighbor and we don't want any problem...

---

[90] "Qatar, Kuwait welcome Iran's nuclear deal with world powers", *Reuters*, 25 November 2013, http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-nuclear-qatar-idUKBRE9AO04V20131125 (accessed 21 July 2017)

[91] Anastasia Nosova. "Kuwaiti Arab Spring? the Role of Transnational Factors in Kuwait's Contentious Politics." *Contentious Politics in the Middle East*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 75-95.

[92] "Kuwait charges 24 'linked to Iran' with plotting attacks", *Khaleej Times*, 1 September 2015, chttps://www.khaleejtimes.com/region/mena/kuwait-charges-24-linked-to-iran-with-plotting-attacks (accessed 22 July 2017)

[93] Habibi, Nader. "The impact of sanctions on Iran-GCC Economic Relations." *Middle East Brief* 45 (2010): 1.

everybody will benefit." [94] Dubai, home to a large community of Iranian expatriates and businesses, perceived the reintegration of Tehran in the international economic community as an opportunity for economic development rather than a threat. Abu Dhabi, instead, closely aligned with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain's view of Iran as a predatory state and a threat to regional stability, a position reinforced by the declaration of the UAE's Ambassador to the United States.[95] Abu Dhabi's position is determined by an ongoing dispute with the Islamic Republic over three islands claimed by both states and occupied by Tehran - Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb –as well as, arguably, the strong relationship between the UAE's capital and Saudi Arabia.

The posture adopted by Qatar was similar to that of Dubai. Khalid Attiyah, the former Qatari Foreign Minister, was one of the first officials in the region to welcome the nuclear agreement, stating that the deal would make the region safer.[96] On one hand, Qatar and Iran share the world's largest natural gas field, North Dome, and thus maintaining working relations with Iran benefits Qatar economically. On the other hand, opening a line of dialogue with Iran – that historically never posed a threat to Doha's stability - potentially provides Qatar with a hedging opportunity, in a way that may increase its chances to pursue their own political interests and act independently from Saudi Arabia.[97] Fast forward to 2017, such pragmatic attitude paid off in the context of the GCC crisis, when Qatar was able to transit through Iran's territorial waters for maintaining its energy export lines open.

Finally, the most divergent approach vis-à-vis the Iran deal within the GCC was clearly taken by Oman. Oman has maintained close links to Iran at least since 1973, when the Shah supported young Sultan Qaboos bin Said in his efforts to end the Dhofar insurgency.[98] Therefore, in diametrical opposition to the experience inscribed in the collective memory of Riyadh and Manama, Iran represents for the incumbent ruling regime a force supporting stability rather than aiming at destabilization. Relations were preserved thorough the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, when Oman was the only GCC country to maintain a neutral position rather than side with Iraq. Oman's unique regional policy, aimed at balancing both Iran and Saudi Arabia, has provided the

---

[94] Riham Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement."

[95] "One Year After the Iran Nuclear Deal – Op-Ed by Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba", 3 April 2016, available on the website of the UAE's Embassy in Washington DC, http://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/one-year-after-iran-nuclear-deal-%E2%80%93-op-ed-ambassador-yousef-al-otaiba (accessed 20 July 2017)

[96] Ali Mamouri, Is Qatar Iran's door to the Gulf?, *Al-Monitor*, 4 November 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-qatar-rapprochement-middle-east.html, (accessed 21 July 2017)

[97] Hussein Kalout, The Geopolitics of the Arab World and the Comprehensive Nuclear Agreement, in Payam Mohseni (ed.), *Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era*, The Iran Project, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 3 August 2015.

[98] Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century", *Middle East Policy Council*, Spring 2010, Volume XVII, Number 1.

Sultanate with hedging opportunities that consolidated its independence.[99] Furthermore, though experiencing sustained turmoil in 2011, such turmoil never involved Oman's sizeable Shia community, that mostly finds its ethnic roots in central Asia rather than Persia, but was instead centred on socio-economic grievances. Crucially, Iran was, in that sense, perceived again as a potential source of stability. Firstly, reintegrating the Islamic Republic into the international community after a decades-long embargo, would potentially open up a huge market for exporting Omani goods or international products via Oman. The unfreezing of Iran's assets could provide capital for Iranian investments in the Omani economy, where joint ventures could create employment opportunities as well as spur the private sectors in both rentier states. In addition to that, Oman shares with Iran the sovereignty over the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly the 20 per cent of global energy exports transit every day: further energy exports from Iran through the Strait would mean also increased gains for Oman. In the energy field, Iran and Oman also signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the construction of a pipeline providing Oman with convenient Iranian gas to cover its energy needs and, potentially, re-export towards India.[100] All of these economic opportunities, explored in an intense exchange of visits after the signing of the deal, would be beneficial for the vulnerable economic development of the Sultanate, where the real stability risk originated in 2011. In these perceptions one has to contextualize Oman's decision to play a key and proactive role in facilitating and enabling the secret talks between Iran and the United States leading to the nuclear agreement.

Comparing these essential factors of Iran-Oman relations to the history of Tehran's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain gives a clear sense of the formidable divergences existing within the GCC, where the perception of Iran, in particular after 2011, changes from gravest threat to ally, touching intermediate levels. These divergences were those that drove the resistances expressed by the Arab monarchs of the Gulf to the idea upgrading the Gulf Cooperation Council to a Gulf Union. Circulating among the GCC leaders since the 1980s, the proposal was brought to the forefront again since 2011 by Saudi Arabia, citing the need to close ranks as in the 1980s against external – read Iranian - threat.[101] The proposal was supported by Bahrain but met a half-hearted response from the other countries, vowing to put it on hold. When, in 2013, Saudi Arabia decided to discuss the subject again, Oman formally and publicly rejected its participation to a potential Union, effectively

---

[99]Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century".
[100] Ayush Gupta and Bhavesh Gupta. "Sourcing of Natural Gas Through Cross Border Pipelines." *Natural Gas Markets in India*. (Singapore: Singapore, 2017), p. 50.
[101] Jane Kinninmont, "Iran and the GCC. Unnecessary Insecurity", Research Paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, *Chatham House*, July 2015, available at
https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150703IranGCCKinninmont.pdf
(accessed 21 July 2017).

sinking the idea, to the relief of many in Qatar and Kuwait as well.[102] It is quite ironic to look back at these circumstances in light of the intra-GCC crises of 2014 and 2017, as the strong divergences in the GCC regimes' security perceptions emerged since the year 2011 are seriously questioning the very future of the GCC as an organisation.

**CONCLUSIONS.**

Considering this analysis of the evolution of the GCC regimes' security perceptions vis-à-vis the major contemporary regional events, it can be argued that those perceptions have been constructed on the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities - such as deep cleavages in the national fabrics, or dysfunctional socio-economic dynamics - and intangible variables such as the country's collective memory, its ontological insecurity, and even leaders' individual perceptions.

While the GCC states are united by strong historical, cultural, social bonds, similar religious customs and traditions and deep political and economic links, they also remain six distinct entities with unique individual specificities. For example, the composition of the national fabrics, is rather different in each country. While they are all absolute monarchies, the political system in Kuwait guarantees a much higher degree of political representation than in all of the other countries, providing a unique avenue for channelling dissent. The macro-economic indicators in the region have some substantial differences, with those of Saudi Arabia not comparable to that of Bahrain and those of Qatar not comparable to those of Oman. The grievances of Oman's unemployed youth could hardly be a source of instability in Qatar and the UAE.  From a historical point of view, Oman's and Bahrain's pre-XVIII century history are rather unique in the Peninsula and Bahrain's history as an Iranian province remains a fundamental factor in its political psyche. The ruling regime in Oman belongs to the Ibadi sect, a branch of Islam that cannot be characterised as Sunni or Shi'a and upholds different principles and costumes than the Saudi Wahhabism. In the Saudi Eastern Province protesters attacked one of the core elements of the founding myth of the Kingdom, the exclusive nature of Wahhabism and its rejection of the Shia religiosity, an accusation that could never be moved at Omani Ibadism. All in all, these national specificities, their socio-economic and socio-political distinctive traits, are increasingly diverging rather than converging and this factor, cannot but continue to impact significantly the existence of common threat perceptions in the region.

---

[102] Interviews of the author with Omani officials, Milan (Italy), 11 July 2015.

While, for example, while one could expect Kuwait and Oman to prioritise respectively domestic politics and economic development, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE to increasingly overlap domestic and regional policies against perceived sources of threats, Qatar has no incentives to join defensive or securitized positions the other Gulf monarchies employed since 2011. With this in mind, the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises clearly show as symptoms of a crack dating back to 2011 that have shattered the axiom of shared security perceptions in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, possibly for good.

In addition, the formation in December 2017 of a Joint Cooperation Council between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, facilitating political, military, economic and social coordination, seems to institutionalise the alliance between the two ambitious, assertive Crown Princes - Mohammad bin Zayed and Mohammad bin Salman - that was behind the new, disruptive approach to regional affairs embodied in the measures against Qatar. This same approach cannot but be described as antithetical - and, perhaps, alarming - to the first generation's traditional ruling style, still represented by the more senior leaders of the GCC and last representatives of the old guard, the Sultan of Oman and the Emir of Kuwait. Indeed, even if the monarchies could find a way to work around their divergent security perceptions, the fact that the personal relationship among their rulers appears compromised, is a serious impediment to envisioning a functioning GCC in the upcoming years.