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# The GCC: Gulf state integration or leadership cooperation?

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# **The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?**

## **Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States**

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# **The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?**

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## **Abstract**

The GCC was forged as an alliance of politically like-minded states which sought to cooperate in the face of perceptibly increasing security threats. The conflict between Iraq and Iran presented security threats to the different Gulf Arab regimes. Saudi Arabia was concerned that the war could encourage some of the smaller states to bandwagon with one of the two adversaries. The smaller Gulf states were prepared to work with Saudi Arabia in preference to the greater threat of Iraq and Iran. The Gulf Arab hereditary regimes formed an association whose launch reflected Arab and national norms by not defining itself in opposition to others and by emphasizing economic cooperation, not common security interests. The ideational construct of Gulf cooperation proved insufficient to overcome the state-centric rationale of maximizing national sovereignty through loose regional political cooperation and bilateral defence pacts with Washington. The increased economic weight of some of the GCC states has seen a competitive search for international prestige that has sometimes been expressed through the construct of 'regional' interests but is fundamentally state-leadership focused. These leaderships remain pivotal in polities largely defined by a ruling family where there is little tradition or practical capacity for devolving authority. As such a major transfer of political authority to supra-state GCC institutions also remains a far-off prospect.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper will consider the rationale for the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and assess its progress according to both the original and subsequent criteria agreed by the member states. The paper will ask why the GCC was formed and to what end, and whether its degree of collective decision-making suggests that the politics of the GCC states should be understood as in any way having become supranational or simply as remaining state orientated, albeit dressed in collective colours for the sake of national or wider legitimacy. In addressing these issues the paper will utilize theoretical perspectives to try to understand the development of this multinational body and why the authority that has been ceded is relatively limited. Neo-realist and constructivist arguments will be drawn on in consideration of the role and purpose of the GCC.

## 2. BACKGROUND TO, AND RATIONALE FOR, THE GCC'S FORMATION

The GCC, the grouping that brings together Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has not changed substantially from the organization that was launched in 1981. This 'cooperative council' (*majlis Al-Ta'wuun*) of the 'states of the Arabian Gulf' continues to be a platform upon which the political leaderships of six neighbouring states seek to cooperate or collaborate in areas of common interest. The GCC was never intended to be a supra-governmental body, nor is it likely to become one.

The introduction to the founding charter of the GCC commits the member countries to achieving 'coordination, integration and interdependence (*tashseeq, takamal wa tarabit*) between them in all fields'. Going on to list the objectives of the GCC, the charter says that this 'coordination, integration and interdependence' should be achieved in order to 'achieve unity between them'.<sup>1</sup> However the only identified areas in which this should occur are economic and financial affairs; commerce, customs and communications; and education and culture. In these areas the charter states that there should be 'similar regulations'. The concepts used are problematic. Coordination is akin to cooperation. By contrast, integration, *takamal* (literally, becoming 'whole' or 'unified') has an implication, at a minimum, of reducing the independence of national decision-making. This may be partly applicable to the economic regulatory structure the GCC eventually agreed. However, the stated objective of achieving 'unity' appears to be more about making an ideational nod in the direction of the wider aim of Arab unity, which the charter is also at pains to stress that the GCC is not a deviation from, and towards which 'coordination' etc. will benefit the 'Arab nation'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the constraining of this vision to 'similar regulations' in, broadly speaking, economic and cultural fields suggests that political unity among the Gulf Arab states would be rather limited in practice. At the root of this official language is the idea that sovereign states with broadly comparable political systems and cultural traditions, which have 'ties of special relations, common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam', should cooperate in areas of mutual advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> GCC charter, Article 4, <http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/index>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The GCC took the spirit of cooperation in which it was formed into aspects of security as well as economic and cultural affairs. It has not achieved political integration in the process, nor has it affected to do so. Riyadh, the location of the GCC's headquarters, the Secretariat, is not Brussels (Barnett and Gause 1998). However, some small aspects of integration have been achieved in the common regulations that affect a number of features of economic activity. More informal cooperation is practised on matters of internal security, while GCC external defence is largely a symbolic display of unity represented by a numerically and practically limited force. Some intellectuals outside of the government realm have a conception of the Gulf as a geopolitical space confined to the territory of the six conservative hereditary Arab regimes. They have conceptualized shared interests, encouraged by the forming of the GCC and by the resentments and outright hostilities that its mostly energy-rich members have attracted from other Middle Eastern states.<sup>3</sup> However, the GCC remains a cooperative alliance of states whose agreements have not fundamentally compromised their sovereignty, nor were ever intended to. Their attachment to each other is limited by degrees of mistrust and a related focus on western security partners, even though the USA did not begin to play an active role in the security of many of the smaller Gulf states until the latter 1980s (Partrick 2006). In order to understand fully how the GCC has been successful as a cooperative platform for trying to advance national interests, but limited in its ability to encourage states to reconceptualize those interests substantially, we need to look at the circumstances in which the GCC was founded and the context in which the above and subsequent official aims emerged.

Saudi analyst Turki Al-Rasheed argues that it was 'Natural behaviour for birds of a feather ... to gather together and engage', and cites the role of former Kuwait emir Sheikh Jabr Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah in encouraging the process (interview, Al-Rasheed, 2010). In the mid-1960s Britain promoted a Trucial States Council of British-protected Gulf sheikhdoms. The formerly British-protected and newly independent Kuwait responded by proposing to send teachers, medics and money to Qatar, Bahrain, Abu

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<sup>3</sup> From 1980 onwards Gulf academics and writers would more regularly exchange ideas about the commonality of identity in the Gulf. The *muntada Al-Tanmiya* (Development Forum), for instance, held an annual conference solely involving intellectuals from the six GCC states. See Barnett and Gause (1998: 178–9).

Dhabi and Dubai in the hope of shepherding their future political development and gaining security in the process, including from Saudi Arabia (Partrick 2006). This, though, was looked on with suspicion by some of the recipients, which, like Britain, saw the hand of Egypt behind Kuwait's generosity. In 1968 the extra-regional Gulf policeman, Britain, which had first begun its role of Gulf protector in the early part of the nineteenth century with a series of 'truces' signed with local rulers, declared that in three years it was withdrawing from its defence role in the area, and therefore ending its commitment to the protection of the ruling families of the Gulf littoral. The Trucial States Council therefore morphed into the UAE minus what became the sovereign states of Qatar and Bahrain. The UAE endured troubled early relations with Saudi Arabia, which was suspicious of the newly independent UK-backed Gulf states, and which withheld recognition of the UAE until it secured a border agreement with Abu Dhabi to its liking in 1974. However, this border has never been completely accepted by Abu Dhabi, something that in recent years has helped sully UAE-Saudi relations. Saudi Arabia had had troubled relations with Britain because of the latter's support for the Gulf littoral states, and had from 1945 begun to look to the USA as its external protector. In that year an understanding was reached based on the USA's desire to build and operate an air field at Dhahran near to the Kingdom's Gulf shoreline (Palmer 1992: 25-9), an agreement that provided the basis for future defence cooperation between the two countries. For its part Bahrain provided an official home in the Gulf to the US Navy as soon as the British departed in 1971.

In the wake of the Gulf security vacuum caused by Britain's departure, there were some early glimmerings of Gulf Arab state cooperation under Saudi Arabia's inevitably dominant wing. In 1976 Riyadh responded by initiating a commitment by the six Gulf state interior ministers to cooperate on cross-border security affairs. In what would prove to be a foretaste of their fear of antagonizing their powerful Gulf neighbours when they founded the GCC itself, the Gulf Arabs then invited Iraq and Iran to a summit meeting of regional foreign ministers in Muscat later that year. However, suggestions from Iraq and Iran of a formal security pact of all eight states were politely resisted, as have been subsequent Iranian initiatives on this score. Notably, the Saudi initiative had emerged from interior minister Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud's concern at the poor state of

relations within the UAE between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, due to moves by Abu Dhabi to federalize the armed forces largely under its control (Holden and Johns 1982: 448). Saudi Arabia, while it had had been wary of the founding of the UAE, saw internal fissures in the Gulf states as an opportunity for other states to exploit, and thereby damage Saudi interests. Saudi Arabia secured a commitment among the six to extradite political ‘criminals, malcontents and dissidents’ (Holden and Johns 1982: 448). The Gulf Arab states were aware that their closer political cooperation would create much suspicion in a shah fiercely sensitive to what he saw as radical Arab and, separately, historic British intrigue across the Gulf. Also, the Ba’athist leadership in Iraq could use any suspicion of a British-backed ‘club’ of Gulf Arab states to try to delegitimize local rulers ideologically or to promote instability on the ground. At the elite non-governmental as well as at the government-backed cultural level, it was assumed during this period that Iraq would be a part of any Gulf state gathering. The *nadwa Al-Tanmiya* (Development Panel) of intellectuals founded in the late 1970s had originally included an Iraqi. Feeling perhaps an ideational need to express solidarity with an Iraq whose conflict with Iran many of the GCC states were aiding, the Arab Bureau of Education of the Gulf States, formed in 1975, included Iraq in its activities.<sup>4</sup> It would later grant Yemen membership as part of that country’s loose association with the GCC.

The outbreak of the Iraq–Iran war in 1980 provided both the impetus for the Gulf Arab hereditary regimes to try to form a clearer association, and the opportunity to do so without attracting so much opprobrium from their neighbours as to render the project stillborn. Just as with the Saudi initiative in 1976, the founding of the GCC in 1981 reflected a desire to cooperate in the face of internal security fears related to external actors. One of the two actors – the newly established revolutionary Shia Islamist regime in Iran – was engaged in heated ideological antipathy to the Gulf Arabs, and, it was feared, would attempt to weaken Saudi Arabia and a number of other Gulf states from within. At the same time a revived Arab nationalist enthusiasm for Saddam Hussein’s leadership of Iraq, which was partly responding to Iran’s assertiveness, was evident

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 1986 the bureau published a book showcasing *al-fananeen al-tashkeeleen fi dawla al-Khaleej al-Arabi* (‘the varieties of art in the states of the Arab Gulf’). It gave ample space for Iraqi artists among the seven ‘Gulf Arab states’ represented. The GCC claims the Bureau as a forerunner of its committee of education ministers. (see GCC Secretariat-General 2009).



among some Gulf Arab intellectuals. From a Saudi perspective, an established sympathy among some of the Kuwaiti and other small Gulf states' merchant classes for Arab nationalism (Partrick 2006), and Dubai's strong historical connection to Iran (in the course of the Iran–Iraq war the emirate was the Islamic Republic's sole Gulf trading partner), created fears that some of the Gulf leaderships might bandwagon with one or the other of the most powerful regional players. In the words of a Saudi government adviser, the GCC was founded following the British departure 'to avoid the situation of those states lacking protection looking elsewhere' (interview, Saudi government adviser, 2010). The Gulf states were not yet in individual defence partnerships with the USA. Wider instabilities in Afghanistan and East Africa, and a Soviet-backed regime on the Arabian Peninsula (South Yemen), compounded the threat perceptions. Therefore a drawing together in both practical cooperation and in an 'instrumental use of [Gulf] identity in order to enhance their security' (Barnett and Gause 1998: 172) led to the GCC's founding.

The GCC charter gave expression to a projected common identity, but said little about security threats. This public emphasis on economics and culture (and not security) was chiefly to appease Iraq and Iran. However, to a greater or lesser extent, it also reflected concerns about Saudi Arabia among the smaller Gulf states. Historically, most of them had been territorially squeezed by the Al-Saud and feared that meaningful political integration would only enhance prospective Saudi hegemony in the future. In this sense countries that earlier in the twentieth century had faced a Saudi territorial challenge – Oman and Abu Dhabi, in the case of Buraimi in 1952–5, and Kuwait, which lost two thirds of its territory to the Al-Saud in 1922 – were bandwagoning with one perceived threat, Saudi Arabia, in order to try to offset a greater concern, Iraq and Iran. Like the residual defence partnership between the newly independent Gulf states and the British, and their varying attempts to embrace the emergent foreign Gulf power of the USA, this was not a security relationship that could speak its name. It also emphasizes that the GCC is not an alliance that benefits from a core state or states whose role of driver is widely accepted. Because of its size and economic strength, that role would naturally fall to Saudi Arabia, as it did to the USA in NATO and to France and Germany

in the EU, but there continues to be firm resistance among the smaller Gulf states to Saudi Arabia's playing any such role in the GCC.

### **3. ECONOMIC INTEGRATION**

As soon as the GCC was founded, an agreement to realize its economic aspirations was signed. The Unified Economic Agreement of 1981 promised a common currency, a collective negotiating structure intended to strengthen the hand of all six states in trade negotiations, and agreement on oil and industrial policy, among other aims. However, for the most part economic integration was in practice put on the back burner, at least as far as intergovernmental agreements were concerned, until the 2000s. Practical steps towards aspects of economic integration have in recent years begun to give meaning to some of the ambitions of the 1981 economic treaty. The Director-General of International Relations at the GCC Secretariat, Abdulaziz Al-Uwaisheg, notes that it is better to 'start with some facts on the ground' before you launch something (interview, Al-Uwaisheg, 2010). In 2003 the GCC Customs Union was launched after collective agreement had been forged on a common 5 per cent tariff to external trade. Its introduction was made necessary by the GCC's desire to secure a free trade agreement with the EU, and it followed a longstanding free trade agreement among member states. The finalization of agreement on a mechanism for transferring revenues collected on non-GCC goods at their point of entry to the GCC is still incomplete – differences over revenue collection and transfer have proved a point of dispute among member states. However, the customs union has harmonized arrangements over what had become a growing if, at no more than 10 per cent, a decidedly minor component of total GCC trade. Some member states are coordinating their revenue collections processes, even if the GCC lacks a single mechanism for transferring revenues and sharing the necessary data and information. Just as with the GCC common market, a proposal long in embryo which was initialled with a five-year target for agreeing its key tracks and then launched in December 2007, aspects of sovereignty have been conceded on the basis of some overall economic gain. A technical committee, the finance and economic cooperation committee (consisting of the relevant ministers from the member states), follows up on the nuts and bolts of what is required to implement the common market and, as do other such ministerial committees,

makes recommendations to the GCC's highest authority, the Supreme Council (of heads of member states).

A degree of political will existed to realize longstanding economic partnership ambitions, a logic encouraged by the growing economic strength of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in particular, and a concomitant desire to try to address burgeoning population needs by some moves towards economic harmonization in order to encourage inward investment and diversification. More prosaically, economic progress also enabled the GCC to produce momentum for a project that was otherwise floundering. From the outset the Gulf states had been more comfortable committing themselves to economic cooperation than to a security partnership, let alone being willing to compromise their national sovereignty by integrating their security or defence functions.

According to the GCC Secretariat, out of hundreds of areas of trade and business that form part of the common market, only four remain without agreement: recruitment, *haj* services, sole agencies, and printing and publishing (interview, Al-Uwaisheg, 2010). Enabling legislation in each member state remains outstanding in a number of areas, however, even if the intragovernmental process has seen agreement on such key areas as labour mobility and pensions. A special committee organized by the UAE finance ministry, set up to discuss the common market and to feed into the GCC's finance and economic cooperation committee, has noted that the official ambitions for the market suffer from restrictions on real estate ownership, a preference for local products or GCC products regardless of quality and price, an absence of unified and binding GCC laws, different accounting systems for companies, legislation gaps, and lack of uniformity in implementation of laws (Kumara 2011).

The expanding number of GCC technical committees, drawing together ministers or other relevant officials from member states, is a reflection of a common desire to regularize and expand the GCC market and to address related needs. Some committees, such as health, agriculture and education, have been in existence as long as or longer than the GCC itself. They usually discuss ways to extend cooperation, whether in research or in more practical ways. However, government policy in these sectors is largely driven by national governments. In the education field, for instance, national policy has become if anything more distinct, with different approaches to preparing students for the jobs

market, for instance, and to the role of religious instruction. Higher education has also become quite competitive, even within countries (Partrick 2010a). The attempt to move towards a more service-sector, 'post-oil' economy in some states has seen rival education cities or zones with prestige and sometimes under-regulated foreign universities setting up shop, while national (or emirate-specific in the UAE case) universities seek to outdo each other in partnerships with foreign academia and businesses (Partrick 2010a). There is some collective research conducted at the Arabian Gulf University, based in Bahrain, for instance, whose founding also predates the GCC. However, this is not given the attention in member states that a number of their national universities are, such as the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates University in Abu Dhabi.

A GCC Standardization Committee was founded in 2011 to tackle the disparity between product regulation in differing GCC countries. Hitherto some of these issues were left to the commerce committee to discuss. The thorny issue of ensuring GCC-wide enforcement of a single patent in a market in which counterfeit goods proliferate is addressed by the GCC Patents Office and its grievances office. Their decisions are supposed to be backed by national legal enforcement.

Many of the GCC's committees and bodies have a discursive or administrative remit only, and at most can make recommendations to the Supreme Council, which in turn often passes issues to its consultative commission in Muscat for further discussion. The Consultative Commission brings together a set of experts from each of the GCC states to consider policy or regulatory issues on a range of matters. A newly created presidency of the consultative commission sits in on Supreme Council meetings as well.

In May 2009 the GCC states agreed to found a monetary policy committee as a stepping stone to monetary union, albeit that Oman and the UAE subsequently decided to opt out, and the target date continues to be adjusted in the light of political and practical problems. There are a number of steps not yet in place among a conceivable first tier of common currency members, including common financial regulations, good relations with each other's financial markets, and accessible shared statistical data through a common

database. In theory the ‘variable geometry’<sup>5</sup> of the EU, whose members are at different stages of integration, could be applied to the GCC. However, the Eurozone crisis in 2011, and the problems caused by weak adherence to convergence criteria and poor fiscal management in countries able to operate without the enforcement of common financial management mechanisms, have further weakened the desire to move ahead in the GCC. If the apparent ‘remedy’ in the EU of closer financial integration between states (Alderman and Kanter 2011) is politically difficult for European countries to agree, it is certainly a very long way off in the Gulf.

There has been on-off progress since 1991 on negotiations towards a free trade area between the GCC and the EU. Throughout the intra-GCC discussions, and the GCC–EU negotiations, the GCC Secretariat in Riyadh has provided research back-up and policy recommendations to the member states to assist their deliberations. Both the Secretariat’s functional role and the outcome of intra-GCC economic initiatives suggest that the GCC is developing some supra-governmental features in aspects of economic affairs. In addition the GCC, while begun by a top-down process when a coherent *Khaleeji* fealty had been lacking, has taken on a life outside of inter-regime cooperation. For instance, the Gulf Chambers of Commerce and Industry meet on a regular basis and have provided impetus for efforts to secure economic agreements within the GCC and input into the GCC’s negotiations with the EU.

The GCC Secretariat argues that, having agreed the customs union, GCC member states cannot alter the agreed tariff without collective GCC approval (interview, Al-Uwaisheg, 2010). However, Oman and Bahrain created a problem for the GCC’s collective management of trade by signing bilateral free trade agreements with the USA in 2006 without coordinating with the GCC. Bahrain and Oman attracted strong criticism from Saudi Arabia for their unilateralism, albeit that the 5 per cent tariff would apply should any US goods then be transferred from either of these countries to any other part of the GCC.

Member state governments have embraced a modest pooling of sovereignty for the common (economic) good. However, set against the impression of a ‘communitaire’

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase used by UK prime minister John Major shortly after he came to power in 1991 to describe the different levels of integration that he believed could operate in the EU.

feeling is a statism at the heart of the economic decision-making structure. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has used its weight to dominate the GCC stance on negotiations with the EU. Commenting on Saudi deputy finance minister Hamid Bazie's leadership of the GCC side in its problematic negotiations with the EU, Saudi academic Ibrahim Al-Duraiby argues, 'The contacts that did exist went through the GCC, where Saudi Arabia, due to its clout (in economy, politics, military etc.) could effectively direct the GCC's negotiations and decisions from within' (Al-Duraiby 2009: 170). If a GCC–EU free trade area sees the light of day it will, however, be as a structured exception to the tariff agreed for the customs union, unlike the unilateral moves of Oman and Bahrain.

Notably, any GCC–EU agreement will have to be approved by each member state. Mr Al-Bazie is able to wear a GCC 'hat' and to draw on the institutional support of the Secretariat in negotiations where in theory he sits opposite his EU counterparts in a comparable role. In practice he is a senior Saudi official authorized to represent the GCC in a process whose final agreement will need to be individually approved by each GCC member state government. EU Commission representatives in the trade negotiations periodically need to consult with more powerful member states.<sup>6</sup> However, EU member states do not wield a veto over an agreement that, as far as the EU is concerned, is in the hands of the Commission negotiators, nor are they able to affect the role of the EU Parliament significantly in providing final treaty ratification. Saudi Arabia sees the collective GCC framework as a way of maximizing its national weight in negotiations with the economically powerful EU. While collective empowerment is partly the logic for states that join the EU, Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent the less powerful GCC states utilize the collective weight of this external relationship, but without being prepared to concede significant national authority in the process. Competing national interests periodically constrain the operation of the EU as a cohesive unit, not least on foreign and security policy, and so much so that the USA has complained that it does not know whom to talk to concerning EU matters. However, there are clear and defined areas of collective responsibility in the EU for which there is an 'address' or a 'phone number'.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, French president Nicolas Sarkozy played an active role in his capacity of representing France in 2008 when it held the six-month revolving presidency of the EU Council.

Even within the area of GCC economic affairs, the Secretariat is plainly not the location where the GCC's external economic relations are managed.

It should be noted, though, that there have been some infrastructural developments that could literally tie the GCC member states more closely together. For example, the development of national rail capability will, it is hoped, facilitate interstate travel throughout the GCC and possibly to Europe via Syria and Turkey. Railway construction is taking place in the UAE, whose emirates are not integrated other than by road, and in Saudi Arabia. It is supposed to begin in Qatar in 2012, where it is planned to include a link to Saudi Arabia eventually. However, a Qatari rail link to Bahrain may still be subject to a Saudi objection to the planned causeway on which it would run, given what Riyadh has in the past claimed would be a Qatari intrusion across Saudi maritime boundaries. Residual Saudi–Qatari tensions may affect their willingness to be connected physically by rail, even if Qatar will need Saudi Arabia's help as an entry point for construction and other materials in advance of Doha hosting the 2022 football World Cup. With the need for rail development arguably greater in the 'disunited Arab Emirates'<sup>7</sup> and in populous and sprawling Saudi Arabia, national rail development has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been slower in Kuwait and Oman. Taking a leaf out of the GCC's electricity grid development plan, prospects for an interstate rail service could conceivably be aided by the creation of a GCC rail authority. A common GCC electricity grid has been developed by the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA), based in Khobar, which is shared by all six member states. Since 2009 it has linked four GCC states – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar – in a common grid. In April 2011 the UAE hooked up to the grid too. If Oman comes on board in the planned third phase then GCCIA members could conceivably all be connected in 2013. This is a potentially valuable economic and strategic development, given the constraints on meeting domestic energy needs for much of the GCC, and the particular problems in the poorer northern emirates of the UAE and in energy-poor Bahrain (Partrick 2008). It is believed that the common grid will aid the development of national rail capability as well.

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<sup>7</sup> A phrase coined by Valerie Grove, a former UAE resident and Arab cultural writer: <http://naturestrikesback.blogspot.com/2009/03/dae-pavilion-at-venice-biennale.html>.

#### **4. SECURITY COOPERATION LIMITED**

In contrast to the relative progress in economic affairs, the undeclared component of the rationale behind the GCC's formation, security cooperation, did not see serious efforts to formalize cooperation. Cooperation was made increasingly necessary as the 1980s saw an Iranian-backed coup attempt in Bahrain and Iranian-linked Shia upheaval in Kuwait, including an assassination attempt on the emir. However, collective efforts came unstuck when domestic considerations intervened. In 1986 a security agreement that would allow member states to call on others to constrain the political activities of exiled opposition figures resident in their territory was agreed by all states except Kuwait, which was sensitive about domestic opinion even though that year it closed down its own parliament. A similar effort met resistance from Kuwait and Oman in 1994.

The creation in 1985 of the Peninsula Shield military force, consisting of units from all six states, implies that 'spillover' was occurring within a GCC 'regime' that was taking on an organizational life of its own, and where the practice of discussion in a collective forum creates its own political momentum (Barnett and Gause 1998). In 1987 GCC foreign ministers declared that an attack on one member state would be regarded as aggression against them all, and the Supreme Council announced a joint pact to ensure cooperation on security matters. Problematically, however, the GCC's military force fits with the artifice of its original security conception, whereby security is conceived through symbols not substance. In 1990 neither Saudi forces, nor the GCC joint brigade stationed in the Saudi town of Hafr al-Batin near Kuwait, provided any deterrence to Iraq. However, the GCC states put aside previous criticism of Kuwait and rallied to the collective cause. The deployment of GCC states' forces in the field of battle in the subsequent Gulf War in sometimes mixed national units was of value as a Gulf construct. Nevertheless, beyond the battle of 'symbols and shadows' (Barnett 1998: 182), the GCC's combined military force would take on little substantive purpose.

Some Gulf commentators see the role of Saudi Arabia and the GCC differently and attach importance to the political symbols of security. Abdullah Bishara was the GCC's first Secretary-General and might be expected to see the organization as having a substantial role. However, specifically in terms of being a Kuwaiti he argues that the GCC had great importance to his country after the Iraqi invasion. 'The GCC is seen here as a



backbone. Maybe Qatar, Oman, UAE, even Bahrain don't understand our feelings. Although the US and UK helped us – the liberation was fought from GCC land, with GCC money, and with the endorsement of the GCC' (interview, Bishara, 2010). Of course Saudi Arabia was pivotal to what can be presented as a collective effort. Haila Al-Mekaimi, a political science professor at Kuwait University, argues that for most GCC states 'the main objective is to coordinate with Saudi Arabia' because of its size and wealth. It 'could protect Kuwait as it was a regional power ... it was supportive, provided territorial depth, was the site of the military campaign to liberate Kuwait, and funded the campaign' (interview, Al-Mekaimi, 2010). It might be questioned how decisive the Saudi role was, however, in ending the occupation and in providing security leadership subsequently.

Notably, an Omani proposal made in December 1990 to give Peninsula Shield military teeth never got beyond the consultation stage. The 1991 Gulf War made public the GCC states' undeclared unilateral military alliances with the USA, and in the process helped weaken collective politics and the symbolic security that went with it. It also emphasized to the small Gulf states, which were often wary of Saudi Arabia, that an external security guarantor was preferable to empowering a Gulf force dominated by Saudi nationals with the right to enter a small state's national territory. The ideational appeal of Egypt and Syria's contribution to the joint (Arab) command in the Gulf War did not survive long into the post-war era. A formal declaration of, in effect, 'GCC+2' regional cooperation was effectively buried when the GCC states balked at the potential security and financial implications of forces from these two states being semi-permanently present on their soil. At the same time Peninsula Shield remained largely irrelevant to GCC states' security. A commitment to enlarge its number from a modest 5,000 and to expand its military role was made in 1993. In December 2000 a renewed commitment to enlargement was made, while a dedicated rapid deployment force was proposed and a more robust joint defence agreement was signed. In this spirit a year later it was decided that a Supreme Defence Council would meet annually to consider how to implement the agreement. By 2006 Saudi Arabia was proposing that Peninsula Shield be disbanded as a collective force, replaced with separate national units confined to their own countries but operating under a collective command. What emerged, however, was

an agreement in December 2009 to form a GCC Rapid Deployment Force of 10,000. It has been likened to a 'fire engine' as opposed to the more significant military actor that had originally been envisaged by Sultan Qaboos (interview, Bishara, 2010). The original Omani proposal is viewed with scorn by many who see even a 100,000 force as a 'symbolic' gesture of self-reliance rather than having substantive capabilities. 'Where are they? Who is going to pay for it?' asks a leading Qatari journalist, who argues that the national forces are not capable of defending their own countries, and doubts how effective a pan-GCC force would therefore be in defending six states (interview, Qatari journalist, 2010).

An example of how ideational cover has been sought by Gulf governments for the pursuit of naked self-interest was the presentation of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's intervention in Bahrain from February 2011 as a GCC Peninsula Shield operation. Saudi Arabia dispatched an estimated 1,500 of its National Guard (as it had sent National Guard forces in response to internal Bahrain unrest in 1996), while Abu Dhabi separately dispatched some of its police units. (Kuwait was also believed to have sent a naval craft in order to show solidarity with its fellow Sunni regimes without overtly antagonizing its numerically significant Shia minority.) The strategic fear that the Bahraini Shia protests caused in Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states has raised the possibility of a more serious effort to boost Peninsula Shield force numbers (Kermali 2011) – probably largely consisting of Saudi forces. This would change the latter's military role in its tiny de facto dependency into a more semi-permanent garrison dressed up in GCC colours.

The GCC provides a useful platform for individual states to present otherwise unpalatable policies to their nationals. As such it has been argued that this evidences how the GCC's creation affected the identity and affinities of Gulf state nationals and provided the potential at least for the development of an identifiable 'security community' at both the intergovernmental and non-governmental level (Barnett and Gause 1998). Strong support by Oman and the UAE for Kuwait after its invasion by Iraq was probably more acceptable to their nationals because their governments could present the issue in terms of a collective interest in Gulf defence. However, the collective framing of policy for reasons of state has not substantially altered intergovernmental behaviour,

much less encouraged the collective determination of Gulf affairs outside of the regulation of trade and the ostensible ambition to form a common currency.

There has been some modest institutional ‘spillover’ in matters of security, but this has easily been set back. For instance, after efforts to agree internal security cooperation, the GCC’s border negotiations committee was the framework on which Saudi Arabia and Oman negotiated their 1992 border deal, and Qatar was prepared to submit its territorial dispute with Bahrain to the committee. However, Bahrain rejected this and ultimately the matter was resolved in 2001 at the International Court of Justice. In 1992 Saudi–Qatari border tensions led to a small number of fatalities and the dispute had to be mediated by an outside Arab leader, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Saudi–Qatari tensions came to the fore again in the mid-1990s over the willingness of each state to interfere in each other’s political affairs. The relatively informal and ad hoc nature of GCC states’ security cooperation, often practised on a bilateral basis, was insufficient for the change of regime in Qatar in 1995 to be accepted in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh objected to the foreign relations policies of the new emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and promoted the return of his ousted father, Khalifa, in turn prompting Hamad to use the full force of Al Jazeera as an anti-Saudi propaganda outlet and to threaten to bring in Iranian or French troops in Qatar’s defence. The two countries did improve their relations and even managed to agree a border deal eventually, notably on a bilateral basis after first turning to the GCC border committee. However, relations continue to be highly sensitive. A leading Qatari journalist commented, ‘we can’t have common responses’ on regional challenges such as Iran. ‘[It’s] not a natural alliance – there is no leading country. Saudi Arabia is still not a strong enough country that it can lead in many issues. In 1990 Saudi Arabia didn’t provide security to itself or for us ... It can’t persuade others of its strength, so everybody is their own leader’ (interview, Qatari journalist, 2010).

## **5. FOREIGN POLICY MAKING**

There are institutional and practical handicaps that constrain foreign policy making within each of the GCC states and that therefore, in the context of jealously guarded political sovereignty, make it all the harder to develop a common political machinery for addressing joint problems. Political systems whose largely unaccountable, hierarchical nature prevents a considered, horizontal assessment of national policy options, involving

meaningful autonomy for policy specialists, understandably lack the basis to conduct this process at the interstate level. It is at the GCC-wide meetings of relevant ministers that substantive consideration of GCC foreign policy, including defence and security policy, is conducted. As Al-Duraiby (2009) writes, lower-level integration, even in links among state apparatus, does not exist. Out of this top-heavy procedure come statements drawn up by GCC Secretariat officials designed to paper over cracks, not to affect the subject being addressed. While the Secretariat can generate ideas designed to address the desire among GCC leaders for closer economic cooperation among themselves, it is much less likely to come up with innovative solutions for managing the GCC's external relations. Without a basis for common political working on foreign policy, then, common foreign relations cannot be advanced.

In this context the role of the Secretary-General, the head of the GCC Secretariat, and therefore its administrative chief, is to function as a kind of representative of agreed policy lines, not in any sense as an innovator or leader. It might be argued that this is akin to the role of the relatively newly created post of President of the European Council (EC) of the EU, in contrast to the President of the European Commission, the EU's supranational bureaucracy. Unlike the Commission, neither the EC presidency nor the EC itself exercises authority in its own right. However, the post of EC President was created in 2009 out of recognition that the need for policy responses between meetings of the EC necessitated that one figure be the point of policy reference, in close consultation, of course, with the EU member states. The dynamic in the case of the GCC Secretary-General is different.

Since the GCC's creation in 1981, the public role of the Secretary-General has been to embody the role of GCC ministers' statements more than the collective will of the member states, which may not always be apparent. In other words, he articulates what has already been agreed and declines to enter into areas for which there is no clearly documented common position. Emblematic of the limits of the job of Secretary-General as anything akin to a supranational role is the fact that Abdulrahman Al-Attiyah also held the formal position of Qatari deputy premier, just as Mr al-Bazie, the GCC lead external trade negotiator with the EU, is organizationally anchored to the Saudi finance ministry. That said, Mr al-Attiyah was seen as an advocate behind the scenes for the GCC to

respond to calls for a more collective role in Yemen by responding to western government pressure to open a development office in Sana (interview, Abdulla, 2010). However, internal GCC lobbying, in tandem with the more public lobbying of western governments, does not suggest that Mr al-Attiyah's 'success' in seeing that policy agreed in September 2010 at the 'Friends of Yemen' meeting in New York gave his office supra-governmental features. Before the retirement of Mr al-Attiyah in December 2010, the issue of who should be his replacement as Secretary-General got caught up in internal GCC politics, rather than the potential being explored for a new incumbent to try to turn the job into something more akin to an executive position. The principal of alphabetically determined succession meant that it was Bahrain's turn to produce a nominee, itself underlining how the GCC functions as a cooperative association of individual states. A revival in Qatari-Bahraini tensions, in part due to Doha's engagement with Iran, perceived anti-Bahraini broadcasting by Al Jazeera and residual territorial sensitivities, made the process in effect subject to a Qatari veto. In the end agreement was reached on the appointment of Bahrain's internal security chief, Abdul Latif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, after Saudi mediation. Al-Zayani's security role did not, seemingly, raise Qatari concerns that he might be an advocate for a stronger GCC role in such matters. The key issue was simply that he did not offend Doha after a previous Bahraini nominee, Mohammed al-Mutawa, was associated by Qatar with hostile propaganda when he was Bahrain's information minister.

In the wake of renewed concerns among some GCC states about the prospective military strength and political influence of Iran following the USA-led overthrow of the Iraqi regime in 2003, the question of how significant a factor the GCC is in the foreign and defence policy calculations of its member countries has particular interest, given that the Iranian threat played such a key role in founding the GCC in the first place. What Prince Saud Al-Faisal called 'handing Iraq to Iran on a plate' raised severe doubts about the wisdom of US policy in the region, contrasted with the regimes' enthusiasm for their bilateral relationship with the USA after 1990. However, this, coupled with the growing focus on asymmetric threats in the wake of 9/11, has contributed to what in diplomatic politesse would be called a more robust relationship, and more demands both on the USA and by it on its individual GCC allies, whether in political, security or military terms. The

GCC states' apparent desire to create a more capable pan-Gulf security force is likely to continue to take second place to individual GCC states' consolidation of their bilateral security relations with the USA as their chief foreign policy focus, for all the residual ideational reference to 'the west' as part of the outer circle of political priorities.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that there are not valuable discussions between relevant Gulf Arab ministers. Rising concern about Iran's relationship to internal security threats saw an impromptu interior ministers' meeting in May 2010 prior to a meeting of heads of state and of foreign ministers (EIU 2010b). However, the degree of practical cooperation is affected, as mentioned, by domestic constraints and by differing threat conceptions. According to Sami Al-Faraj, a consultant to the Kuwaiti leadership and to the GCC, 'The GCC is now developing different [policy] modes ... Saudi Arabia is aloof regarding Oman', which, he argues, like Qatar, favours engagement towards Iran, while Riyadh 'shares the Iran threat perception of the UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain' (interview, Al-Faraj, 2010). The importance of ad hoc subregional alliances is widely acknowledged in the GCC. An issue like Iran's nuclear programme is discussed 'both at GCC meetings and bilaterally', according to a leading Qatari journalist, who says that within the GCC, 'they will talk and debate issues, but everybody is taking their own position. Bilateral relations are sometimes more important' (interview, Qatari journalist, 2010).

Broad-brush GCC statements are therefore issued urging Iran to cooperate with the international community over its nuclear programme and in support of sanctions already authorized by the UN Security Council. However, coherent policy programmes cannot be constructed in the context of different outlooks and different calculations. Saudi-Qatari differences on how to approach Iran suggest a different strategy and an ongoing historical resentment between the GCC's dominant actor and a newer player on the block. According to a Saudi government adviser, 'Qatar is trying to accommodate Iran to get security', involving it in dealing with Iranian-linked groups Hamas, Hizbollah 'and worse'. This is also seen by the adviser and by many others close to the Saudi government as 'decisions made by a country for political glory' (interview, Saudi government adviser, 2010). A well-connected Saudi journalist said, 'Being independent

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<sup>8</sup> This view was expressed to the author by the former chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the *majlis al-shoura* (consultative council) of Saudi Arabia, Dr Mohammed Ibraheem al Hulwah, in Riyadh, June 2007. It is referenced in Partrick (2007).

of Saudi Arabia seems to be an end in itself.’ A leading Qatari journalist commented that ‘Saudi Arabia sees itself as vulnerable ... as needing to have a tougher stand [on Iran], but other states can afford to not do so. It’s not in our hands. We are small countries and we are not in the business of leading or dominating everybody – this is part and parcel of stability in our area. We have conversations with everybody.’ He added that this is done in the context of the Qatari–US relationship. ‘We use it to our advantage. Otherwise,’ he said, ‘the experience of [Kuwait in] 1990 occurs’ (interview, Qatari journalist, 2010).

It is not just Qatar that feels its views are not taken seriously by Saudi Arabia, and that the region’s traditional deference to age counts against it in the eyes of the Kingdom (interview, Qatari journalist, 2010). In the assessment of leading Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, relations have ‘never been problem free, [but] one thing that is new is that the UAE and Qatar have the feeling that they’re not being treated equally, [but] as a junior player ... [and that Saudi Arabia is] not respecting what they’ve achieved’ (interview, Abdulla, 2010). The exponential economic growth of gas-rich Qatar, the global importance of the sovereign wealth held by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait, and the importance of all four countries’ energy resources and know-how to the growth plans of China and India in particular (Ulrichsen 2010) have created a desire, especially on the part of Qatar and the UAE, to be taken as seriously by Saudi Arabia within a Gulf context as they are increasingly being taken internationally. Abdulla argues that ‘Unless they are treated equally’ the UAE leadership ‘intends to send a message: we are the second biggest economy [in the GCC], we have vast [numbers of] friends left and right; [and that the] “little brothers” are aware of their own strength.’ Abdulla cites the GCC’s decision in May 2009 to make Riyadh the headquarters of the precursor to the planned common currency, the GCC monetary policy committee. Noting that Abu Dhabi does not host any of the GCC institutions, he says that among the member states there was ‘an understanding that this [Abu Dhabi was] going to be the [monetary] HQ’. Since the death of the UAE’s founding president, Sheikh Zayed Al-Nahayan, in 2005, a younger generation of leaders in Abu Dhabi have been more willing to challenge what they consider the controversial circumstances in which the 1974 border agreement was made. The extent of this determination shocks some Saudis, who have noted that the Kingdom’s foreign minister, Saud Al-Faisal, has had the issue put to him

privately by a senior Abu Dhabi leader in highly undiplomatic language.<sup>9</sup> The ‘symbolism’ of the UAE’s depiction of a different border with Saudi Arabia in official documents, including on its version of the GCC’s own identity card, became wrapped up with the currency headquarters dispute, Emiratis concede (interview, Abdulla, 2010). In March 2010 a Saudi maritime border guards vessel was shot at by Abu Dhabi coastguards, who detained two Saudi guards for forty-eight hours (EIU 2010c). The next month Emirati vehicles were once again held up from crossing into Saudi Arabia for a few days, the second time such a delay had occurred in twelve months. In addition, the unpublished maritime border delimitation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in March 2001, while evidence of an improved relationship compared to the 1990s, effectively compromises Emirati maritime boundary claims vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

Former GCC Secretary-General Abdullah Bishara argues that the GCC is in need of leadership. He likens the GCC to ‘a train of six carriages’ without a state to pull it. Saudi Arabia is inhibited, as Bishara suggests, from ‘playing the big brother role’ (interview, Bishara, 2010). However, this does not stop it periodically adopting a proprietorial attitude towards GCC affairs, which compounds the resistance of some states, at least, to any notion that Riyadh should ever be the engine that pulls the train, even if it is willing and able to play that role.

Abdulkhaleq Abdulla argues that, despite the ‘jolt’ in progress towards monetary unity, the GCC has, by launching the initiative in 2010, made ‘half a step forward’. Some believe that the UAE will reconsider its objection, especially if it is given a symbolic concession by Saudi Arabia to assuage its hurt feelings. The UAE’s present opt-out, could, Abdulla suggests, just be a ‘bargaining position’. However, the UAE’s rejection continued to be firm at the December 2010 GCC Supreme Council (heads of state) meeting. The border issue could be even harder to resolve. Emiratis see the ‘generational’ issue as just as relevant to the Saudi approach to Abu Dhabi’s complaints, citing the important role of prospective Saudi king and current interior minister Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz in the original border deal (interview, Abdulla, 2010; Al-Qassemi, 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> Saud Al-Faisal was, says a Saudi GCC Secretariat official who specializes in political and security matters, told directly that ‘our father was fooled’ over the border deal that led to Saudi recognition of the UAE (interview, Saudi politics and security analyst, 2010).



In addition to wariness among some of the smaller Gulf states regarding Saudi Arabia's role in the GCC, the Al-Saud's historic territorial expansionism (see e.g. Kostiner 1993) undermines its value as a security partner even when its security role in more recent decades has been valued. Some of the smaller GCC states share Saudi Arabia's assessment of the principal regional threats and have a similar view of how to handle them. However, the supposedly reluctant 'big brother' is not looked to as their primary defender. Kuwait, like Bahrain, enjoys relatively close political relations with Saudi Arabia. Kuwait's tendency to cleave close to Saudi Arabia grew as Egypt's strength waned in the post-1967 regional environment (Partrick 2006) and was especially marked after the 1990 invasion by Iraq. However, even after 1990, there was unwillingness on the part of Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to trust Kuwait's judgement concerning the extent of the Iraqi threat. According to Sami Al-Faraj, despite their appreciation of its role in 1990, the apparent reluctance of Saudi Arabia to support a coalition military build-up in 1994 led Kuwait to think that 'We can't wait for Saudi domestic decision-making ... [i]t's down to one guy: [Defence Minister Prince] Sultan ... We can't entrust the security of the nation to the whim of one guy' (interview, Al-Faraj, 2010).

The GCC states only conduct substantive discussions about regional security with the USA and they do this on a bilateral basis. A Saudi government adviser says that there should be 'coordination on defence and security issues' between the GCC states, in addition to trade and (planned) transport cooperation, but he rules out a common defence force (interview, Saudi government adviser, 2010). There may, though, be scope for more intra-GCC military cooperation. Having agreed in September 2010 to purchase state-of-the-art ballistic missile defences from the USA, the UAE subsequently suggested that ballistic missile defence should be GCC-wide.<sup>10</sup> This is a longstanding idea for a collective anti-missile shield that would in theory be collectively tied in to the US military. However, this idea has previously been frustrated by political as well as financial constraints. On the question of regional security in the event that Iran develops a

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<sup>10</sup> Referencing the need for a region-wide defence system to deal with incoming ballistic missiles, Major General Ali Al-Kaabi, the UAE's deputy chief of staff, told a regional defence conference in early December 2010, 'We must be prepared to defend our people, our nation and our region against any emerging threat' (Arab News 2010a).

nuclear weapons capability, GCC states look chiefly to the USA. For Saudi Arabia it has been semi-officially conceded that this could mean enhancing the existing US security commitment to create an overt 'US nuclear umbrella'.<sup>11</sup>

It has been observed that, aside from residual sensitivities between otherwise cooperating states, 'resources and capabilities' (Fawcett 2004) limit the ability of regional organizations to rely on themselves for defence and security. Limited troop numbers and a non-martial tradition are a common feature in the GCC, with the partial exception of Omani military competence gained through internal security challenges. The Gulf Arab states look outside of the Gulf for their individual security and in doing so they chiefly remains focused on the USA. By contrast a Chinese role in Gulf security still looks remote. The unprecedented Chinese naval visit to Abu Dhabi in March 2010 largely related to China's role in the international effort to combat piracy in the Red Sea and Arabian Sea (EIU 2010c), and hardly compares with the extensive naval and airbase agreements that the USA and to a lesser extent the UK have with the small Gulf states. China is the one Asian country with a realistic potential to play a role in Gulf security over the longer term, but at present lacks sufficient military reach to project power and seems content to ride on the back of the USA in seeking the security of Gulf oil supplies (Davidson 2010). However, GCC states' suspicions of both India and China are also a factor in Gulf preferences for Washington. A well-connected Saudi journalist said, 'geopolitically they [India] are seen as a threat. They [local rulers] don't like bringing Indian mercenaries.', alluding to India's historic role in the Gulf and the danger that 'they may still be working for the [Indian] government', a concern he said was felt about Indian (and other south Asian) workers. China too attracts suspicion. This is not confined to Oman, where in the 1960s and 1970s China aided Dhofari rebels, or to Kuwait, where it is remembered that China proved weak supporters of the war to remove Iraq and of the subsequent UN sanctions. According to the well-connected Saudi journalist, 'If history allows them to occupy, they will; they're still imperialist, still fighting with the Japanese over nationalist interests.'

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<sup>11</sup> In April 2002, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, then Saudi ambassador to the UK, presented three options at a subsequently reported off-the-record discussion. They were a US nuclear umbrella, seeking 'regional support' (which implied Pakistan) or pursuing its own nuclear programme (EIU 2002).

Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE joined NATO's Istanbul Process, which was launched in 2004 to provide bilateral assistance in different aspects of security, whether institutional reform or dealing with asymmetric threats. While the participation of some GCC countries in this NATO-led process is seemingly coordinated with Saudi Arabia (interview, Al-Mekaimi, 2010), there is no collective GCC engagement with either NATO or specifically the USA.<sup>12</sup> Historically Kuwait's breaking of a national taboo by engaging the USA in defence of its oil tankers in 1986 opened the door to the same role for the rest of the GCC states, following retrospective GCC approval for Kuwait's action, itself conducted with Saudi Arabia's approval (Partrick 2006). However, this 'regional' protection was bilaterally provided, as it has continued to be to this day. In a recent confidential US memo, UAE Chief of Staff Hamad Al-Rumaithi is reported as arguing that, in the face of Iranian threats, 'the UAE seeks ongoing support from the region's "main actor", the US, and desires closer defence coordination'.<sup>13</sup> Separately the UAE foreign minister, Abdullah bin Zayyed Al-Nahayyan, emphasized his country's dependence on US regional strategy when he voiced a complaint, still commonly heard across the GCC, that the Gulf states are not a party to the periodic negotiations of western states with Iran, which have a direct bearing on them. 'We still need some serious trust building between the US, the EU, and the GCC', he said.<sup>14</sup> More recently he suggested that a 'GCC+3' grouping should conduct talks with the P5+1 group (made up of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) that meets with Iran.<sup>15</sup> This increasingly strong UAE view of the need for the Gulf states to be properly consulted was expressed more publicly in the margins of the GCC annual summit conference in December 2010, when an unnamed UAE official commented, 'We are not part of the problem, but we want to be part of the solution' (Arab News 2010a). The crucial importance of the Gulf states' bilateral relationship with the USA even played a

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<sup>12</sup> In 2004 Kuwait was also designated by the USA as one of its 'major non-NATO allies'.

<sup>13</sup> US Embassy Abu Dhabi confidential account of a meeting between Assistant Secretary of State for Defence Vershbow and UAE Chief of Staff Hamad Al-Rumaithi, 20 July 2010, <http://www.cablegate.wikileaks.org>, accessed 1 December 2010.

<sup>14</sup> US Embassy confidential account of meeting between leading US Congressmen and Congresswomen and UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayyed, 16 May 2005, <http://www.cablegate.wikileaks.org>, accessed 1 December 2010.

<sup>15</sup> US Embassy confidential account of meeting between Hilary Clinton and Abdullah bin Zayyed, 7 April 2009, <http://www.cablegate.wikileaks.org>. 'GCC+3' implied Turkey as well as Egypt and Jordan.

role in their interest in an updated version of the GCC+2 dialogue – with Egypt and Jordan, which Washington encouraged as a building of regional dialogue in the face of common threat perceptions vis-à-vis Iran. Wariness of Egypt's post-Mubarak direction, and a perceptible loss of this 'prop', seems to have encouraged Saudi consideration of Jordanian and Moroccan membership of the GCC.

Individual GCC states look to the USA for critical security support, but are uncomfortable with being merely a mute partner in dealing with what they see as the pre-eminent Gulf security issue at present: Iran (interviews, Gulf academics, 2007, 2008). This slight flexing of political muscles has been more assertively complemented in economic terms. The increased and sometimes economic power of a number of GCC states is, though, often ostentatiously brandished for reasons of symbolism rather than substance. This often reflects Gulf states' petty-minded competition, as well as that between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, rather than a coherent strategy to secure influence. An Emirati scholar commented, 'The families are saying we are providing for you, look how far we have come' (interview, September 2010).

Whether desired or not, the world economic downturn from 2008 emphasized the GCC states' importance to the international economic recovery, and underlined something of an alternative economic model that they, in common with China and other global players, adhere to: 'state-supported capitalism' (Ulrichsen 2010). This does not mean that the stronger, wealthier Gulf states will outgrow the need to be members of the GCC. As a political association in which a construct of Arab solidarity can sometimes usefully be deployed, divisions can hopefully be managed and practical forms of economic cooperation are being advanced, it has its uses. Strategic bilateral relations with the USA also sit comfortably with Gulf Arab involvement in the GCC. The relative economic dynamism of the UAE economy and the international profile this affords, and the sheer weight of Saudi Arabia as an oil player, are not without their problems, economic and political. This suggests limits to how confident even these states would feel in venturing forth without a formal Gulf alliance.

## **6. REGIONAL OR NATIONAL INTERESTS?**

What has been called the 'Arab Gulf moment' (Abdulla 2010) serves to underline the state-centric focus of individual GCC states. Their urging that they receive greater

representation in the international financial institutions is posited in individual terms and expected on an individual basis (Ibrahim Al-Assaf, Saudi finance minister, cited in Ulrichsen 2010). While Saudi Arabia's membership of the G20 is seen by some within the region as an acknowledgement of the Gulf states' increased global economic importance, the Kingdom no more 'represents' the GCC at G20 meetings than Qatar will, rhetoric aside, in hosting the 2022 World Cup, or for that matter than Lebanon represented the Arab world on the UN Security Council over 2009–11. In this sense the GCC states' desire to be heard and represented in international economic fora is a *very* soft<sup>16</sup> form of regionalism. The demand, just like that of the UAE concerning western-led talks with Iran, potentially increases their domestic and regional legitimacy, offsetting delegitimizing perceptions of weakness in the face of western allies. There is, though, only a limited sense of leveraging this economic strength politically, as for example in the UAE's success in securing Abu Dhabi as the location for an international renewable energy centre, IRENA (Carrington 2010), albeit that this was more about the country's economic status and a desire to market it in a perceptibly more environmentally friendly fashion. In part reflecting their economic focus and a traditional disinclination to be overexposed domestically or regionally in political terms, quiet political influence on a national basis is sought by the leading GCC states, not a pronounced assertion that could draw them more actively into diplomatic processes with which they would be uncomfortable. The role of regionalism in this push for greater respect on an international stage, in which interstate economic cooperation, not global economic norms, is being asserted, is as a prop of national interests. Competitive GCC states are increasingly flaunting their economic prestige, to some extent nationalistically, and regional demands are an instrumental part of this.

That said, the GCC sits awkwardly as a 'region', when the Gulf as geopolitical space obviously takes in the two states that chiefly spawned the GCC's formation, Iraq and Iran. Relations with these two countries remain mediated through a unilateral US relationship, even, as seen above, if this produces some periodic political disquiet. Other regional groupings, such as ASEAN and ECOWAS, have, in consultation or partnership with the UN, taken on peacekeeping roles, while ASEAN has also expanded to set up an

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<sup>16</sup> Louise Fawcett (2004) refers to soft regionalism as informal cooperation within a region.

institutional dialogue (ASEAN plus 3: 'APT') with the three pre-eminent East Asian powers, China, Japan and South Korea. By contrast, the 'GCC+2' sought to isolate Iran. It is true that individual GCC states have pursued confidence-building mechanisms with Iran such as joint maritime military exercises or notification of national ones, while several of these states have opened diplomatic relations with the new Iraqi regime and written off the former regime's debts. Beyond this, however, the ability of the GCC to transfer the organizational apparatus of cooperation into coordinated policy towards Iraq or Iran looks limited. On the economic front, an attempted drawing together and simplifying of external trade procedures for goods entering the GCC 'region' fits with the widespread conception among GCC states that increased economic weight would give them 'a seat at the table' in international economic fora.<sup>17</sup> How such weight might be coordinated, let alone represented at the high table, is unclear. Saudi Arabia's seat at the G20 would perhaps be bolstered by the agreement of a GCC common currency (Posen 2010); how this would aid the GCC states collectively is less obvious.

In a sense, seeking a stronger Gulf voice in international economic affairs suggests that the GCC states are regionally and proactively resisting 'globalization', at least in the form of a western-dominated economic model. International criticism of Gulf states' individual record of adherence to the putative 'global' norm of human rights meets a more insular response, however, firmly rooted in a conception of national sovereignty (Ulrichsen 2010). There is arguably a *Khaleeji* political norm of a hereditary polity with varying degrees of political inclusion of non-ruling family politicians in executive decision-making, something alluded to in the GCC charter's reference to 'common characteristics'. Maintaining their own political traditions is collectively defended by the GCC, but more typically this is done with the rejection of the emergent, but still contested, 'global' norm of humanitarian intervention.

The GCC's regional 'institutionalization', reflected in attendant regional decision-making fora, has not deepened to create an increasing norm of cooperation, even if ad hoc cooperation has been seen. There is no 'multilayered governance'<sup>18</sup> in the GCC.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, GCC Assistant Secretary General Mohammed Al Mazroui, a Saudi, quoted in Hartley (2009); Kuwaiti officials quoted in EIU (2010a).

<sup>18</sup> A term adopted by Fawcett (2004: 431) to describe the variety of forms of authority that states can be a part of.

Rather there is what Fawcett has described as the ‘striking disjuncture between shared ideas and institutions in the Middle East’ (2004: 442). Fawcett has also noted that in general new, ‘fragile’ states are highly defensive of the relatively recent acquisition of sovereignty, and that such organizations in the developing world can ‘cynically’ provide ‘a veneer of regionalism to cover state interests’ (2004: 444, 439).

Against this backdrop GCC states can sometimes agree to deploy the symbols of cooperation, but, with only the partial exception of economic affairs, not the substance. Monetary union, if applied, would end each country’s formal fiscal policy independence, albeit that to a greater or lesser extent their national currencies are all already pegged to the US dollar. Before monetary union could be created, interstate agreement would have to be reached on decision-making mechanisms at the proposed central bank, and on its access to each country’s international reserves, among other nationally sensitive issues.

The GCC’s collective policy endeavour on Yemen has been comparable to the GCC’s public presentation of a common, unified position on Iraq, whether opposing the war between it and Iran in the 1980s, seeking a diplomatic end to the Gulf crisis in 1990, or opposing a US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. As already seen, collective policy positions provide cover to an individual state leadership embarking on an action that might be viewed sceptically at home. The GCC provided post facto support to Saudi Arabia when, in November 2009, it took what in modern times was a rare step for the Kingdom, that of sending ground troops into Yemen, or when it presented its regional uranium enrichment initiative towards Iran in 2007, itself more about atmospherics than a Saudi desire to shoulder the diplomatic burden with Iran (Partrick 2007: 25).

In December 2006 the GCC announced that the Secretariat would commission research into the development of civil nuclear power, a decision that a senior analyst at a local, semi-official think tank presented as sending a signal to Iran of potential military options in the future (Hurst 2007). While GCC Secretary-General Abdulrahman Al-Attiyah initially coordinated with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on these research plans, those close to official thinking in Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw the initiative as the precursor to national programmes (Partrick 2007). Since 2008 the UAE, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia, have forged ahead with plans for their own national nuclear programmes.

The imprimatur of collective GCC backing serves an instrumental purpose for individual Gulf states. Alternatively, GCC agreement can provide cover for individual state policies entirely at odds with the collective stance, as in 2003 when the GCC, just like the individual Gulf states, opposed a military invasion of Iraq but Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain in particular played a key role in facilitating the US-led military action. Similarly, the GCC and each individual GCC state regularly urges a diplomatic, peaceful solution to the issue of Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>19</sup> However, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has privately told the USA to take military action against it,<sup>20</sup> and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Bin Zayed, has been documented comfortably discussing US military responses to what he considers the unacceptable scenario of an Iran with nuclear weapons.<sup>21</sup> In fact a top UAE official has even gone public in expressing support for military action in the event that Iran develops a nuclear weapons capacity.<sup>22</sup>

## **7. EXPANDING THE GCC**

The GCC's relations with Yemen have followed a familiar pattern of symbolic collective action. However, in one key respect at least, the GCC cannot simply function as a cover for policies determined at the national level: that of whether to admit Yemen as a GCC member. A longstanding Yemeni objective was in 2005 met with a ten-year timeline proffered by GCC heads of state meeting in Abu Dhabi. It is doubtful, though, that any of the GCC states seriously wanted to allow Yemen to move beyond its membership, agreed at the December 2001 GCC heads of state summit of the GCC's health and labour and social affairs committees, to full GCC membership. The GCC also granted Yemen the right to play in the Gulf Football Cup, a right that had always been extended to Iraq. Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh famously quipped that the next stage would be the GCC basketball team. After all, despite geographic proximity and some comparative social features, full GCC membership for republican Yemen would run counter to the

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<sup>19</sup> For example at the December 2010 GCC annual summit (Arab News 2010b).

<sup>20</sup> US embassy cable from Riyadh to Washington, DC, 20 April 2008, <http://www.cablegate.wikileaks.org>, accessed 28 November 2010.

<sup>21</sup> US embassy cable from Abu Dhabi to Washington, DC, 16 May 2005, <http://www.cablegate.wikileaks.org>, accessed 28 November 2010.

<sup>22</sup> In July 2010, speaking in a public US forum, UAE ambassador to the US Yousef Al-Otaibi strongly implied that an Israeli attack on Iran was preferable to an Iran that had nuclear weapons (EIU 2010e).



promotion of a Gulf identity that has built on the ‘common characteristics’ of the hereditary regimes, a factor of even greater purchase in the debate about Jordanian or Moroccan membership (see below). Furthermore, the threat of civil war in Yemen from spring 2011 onwards has seen the GCC states handle it purely as a neighbouring security problem in need of, essentially, Saudi diplomacy. Dressed up as a GCC initiative, the so-called GCC Peace Plan, which Qatar soon pulled out of, remains stalled at the time of writing (EIU 2011a, 2011b). Even from his hospital bed in Riyadh, the Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, is able to frustrate hopes for a managed transition to a more inclusive government.

Should internal political compromise somehow be agreed in Yemen, a resumption of some version of the managed pluralism of the country’s competing political parties is not likely to make the country any more desirable as a full GCC member. Rather, what hitherto had been the agreed GCC policy line represented a compromise between the desire of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to bolster the political leadership of an unstable neighbour that could be an external security problem, and Kuwait, which has maintained a firm rejection of Yemen ever since joining, due to the latter’s stance on the Iraqi occupation in 1990. Prior to the outbreak of violence in Sana in 2011 there had been a reawakening in Yemen of southern secessionist challenges, the development of an armed northern Shia movement with alleged Iranian links, and a growth in Al-Qaida activity. The GCC in response quietly buried its official timeline for Yemeni membership (Partrick 2010b). The USA and the UK in particular have pressed the GCC to take greater responsibility for Yemen, including the hope that efforts will be coordinated and will work in tandem with, not contradiction to, each other. However, periodic Qatari mediation in 2007–8 was frustrated by Saudi Arabia’s suspicions of interventions in its ‘backyard’. State-centric calculations of interest have continued to trump pretensions to collective decision-making. Likewise the current GCC Peace Plan, while formally owned by all the member states, has emphasized how pivotal Saudi Arabia, Yemen’s large and influential neighbour, is in prospects for a political settlement there. Without Riyadh publicly associating itself with an alternative to Saleh, external diplomacy seems stymied.

More modestly, the GCC, under US and UK pressure, committed itself to aid Yemeni development needs. However, Gulf Arab developmental capabilities are

constrained at the national, let alone collective GCC, level. Despite this, a commitment to a common GCC development office was made, even though individual GCC states have no such dedicated developmental presence and no framework for coordinating their aid programmes. This would be a constraining factor on any collective capability and is acknowledged as such by local observers (interview, Qatari journalist, 2010). Yemen continues to demand increased access to the labour markets of GCC states. It argues that, together with Gulf aid money, this would assist economic development and thereby help counter internal security problems and reduce the gap in living standards between Yemen and the GCC which has been argued by some Gulf states as a reason not to grant it membership. The GCC states argue either that increased labour market access is a security issue or that it is a matter of the suitability of Yemeni workers' skill sets. Some GCC countries are seeking to address the latter issue by promoting job training strictly inside Yemen, but, like aid provision, without coordination with other Gulf states.

Periodically the issue of Iraq's relationship with the GCC is raised by Iraqi officials who urge some form of association including a more open trade regime. While never saying 'never' in public, the GCC states are uniformly resistant to any kind of association with post-Saddam Iraq, in contrast with their attitude to Yemen. The rationale behind the GCC's creation – that the Gulf Arab states should associate together to offset the pressure from both Iraq and Iran – has not been lessened following a change of regime in Baghdad that has given Iran weight in Iraq and aided its position in the wider region.

The surprise announcement by the GCC Secretary-General Abdullateef Al-Zayani in May 2011 that Jordan and Morocco had been invited to begin accession talks with the member states of the GCC provided further evidence that the organization lacks an integrated policy machine or even meaningful consultation. Apparently the result of a whim of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, the announcement even took Morocco by surprise, not to mention some actual GCC member states, including Kuwait and the UAE (EIU 2011b). Kuwait would not welcome Jordan's admittance in particular, given King Hussein's apparent backing for Iraq in the 1990–1 Gulf crisis. The UAE has sought a delay in talks taking place. Exploratory talks, however, began at a GCC summit in Saudi Arabia in mid-September 2011.

This initiative was not about the GCC having substance as an institutional ‘regime’ with its own collective momentum, nor did it suggest that Gulf regionalism was strongly rooted as a concept. In fact it clearly showed the GCC to be a loose coalition of convenience between broadly like-minded, but uncoordinated, states. Following the change of leadership in Egypt, a long-time ally of the Gulf states, this initiative appears to have been born of a largely Saudi desire to see whether the military capabilities and relative size of the Jordanian and Moroccan armed forces can enhance Gulf security vis-à-vis Iran and other potential regional external threat scenarios, and, by Arab monarchies and sheikhdoms drawing together, to try to offset shared political pressures in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring through mutual economic support.

Jordan first applied to join the GCC in 1988. As a bordering country with large number of skilled workers in the GCC area, Jordan already has fairly strong connections with the GCC (Al-Sharif 2011). It is argued, however, that Jordan does not need to be in the GCC to gain Saudi or other GCC states’ economic support, while the prospect of greater access to the Gulf labour market for the relatively populous Jordanian and Moroccan workforce contradicts the GCC states’ desire to ‘nationalize’ their workforce (Partrick 2010a). More fundamentally, perhaps, Jordanian membership would bring the perceptibly risky outcome of a de facto GCC border with Israel and deepen the perceptible security problem of largely Palestinian Jordanians, whose role in the Gulf crisis of 1990–1 strengthened an extant trend towards non-Arab foreign labour in Kuwait and more widely in the Gulf Arab states (Partrick 2006: 223).

There is the possibility of something less than full membership, possibly some kind of associate status, being granted, to existing or would-be applicants. This seems feasible in the case of Jordan at least; it is unlikely to happen in the case of longstanding candidate country Yemen. In part the threatening civil conflict in Yemen will have hardened resistance within the GCC even further, on the basis that, even on a partial basis, the risks of Yemeni membership are those of importing political problems. Such a concern is plainly also shared about Iraq. There is little interest, seemingly, in proffering staged membership in return for political and economic ‘goals’ being realized. After all, the extant members are at different stages of political and economic development and

seem uninterested in seeking to harmonize economic policies, for instance, as a prelude to more meaningful economic integration.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Any movement towards more substantive cooperation – whether in the economic or security realm – is unlikely without a willingness to compromise national political control. Former GCC Secretary-General Abdullah Bishara believes that the planned common currency is liable to continue to be frustrated by attachments to national sovereignty, regardless of the extant constraints on financial sovereignty. Sovereignty, he argues, is the block on all substantive agreement in the GCC: ‘If there is a discussion the word that is always raised is sovereignty. It’s sacrosanct’ (interview, Bishara, 2010)

Despite their political similarities, there are significant variations in the operation of the political systems in the Gulf, which vary from the limited governmental consultation evident in the UAE to the frustrations caused to the government by an empowered legislature in Kuwait. However, all the GCC state leaderships concentrate the management of external relations, and much of the business of domestic affairs, in the hands of an executive dominated by members of the ruling family. These families are united in seeking to maintain a tight grip on their largely exclusive control of decision-making and are not minded to share it with other ruling families in the region. As Al-Duraiby observes, the GCC was ‘founded on the idea of preserving the autonomy, security and sovereignty of its member states’ (2009: 200). National identity and legitimacy in the GCC states have historically been embodied in a hereditary leadership whose state-led national ‘imagining’ reflects an exclusive interpretation of the national experience (Partrick 2009). Maintaining political legitimacy requires a judicious use of economic patronage and ‘correct’ ideational symbols, including adherence to Islamic and (residual) Arab norms. *Khaleeji* (Gulf) identity is necessarily presented as in accord with these symbols. The exercise of state sovereignty is inextricably bound up with the practice of ‘correct’ leadership, usually with little political accountability. In such an environment, the prospect of thirty years of partial political and economic cooperation eventually transforming into a compromise of national political authority seems remote. King Abdullah commented at a meeting of GCC ministers in October 2002 that inter-state military integration in the GCC would not occur without political integration (Al-

Duraiby 2009: 130–1). Foreign and defence policy options on key regional issues are, inevitably, bound up with national calculations. ‘Cooperation in extremis’ is how a Saudi working on political affairs at the GCC Secretariat characterizes the way the organization behaves. He cites collective plans he is aware of for disaster management, such as in the event of a nuclear leak in Iran, and contrasts this with the difficulty of developing an agreed policy on preventing Iran having a nuclear weapons capability (interview, Saudi politics and security analyst, 2010).

The difficulties in coordinating a common policy on Yemen, beyond the issuing of symbolic statements, is emblematic of how much the GCC has remained true to its original conception: to be a body encouraging cooperation, which from the outset felt more comfortable reducing economic barriers than coordinating defence or security policy. Despite the ambiguities of some of the GCC charter’s language, the organization was founded as nothing more than a cooperative body of sovereign Arab Gulf states that drew closer together as they felt their sovereignty to be under threat. Saudi Arabia’s attitude towards the GCC was less about its regional vulnerability than about fearing what the vulnerability of its smaller neighbours might lead them to do. A regional structure was the means for Saudi Arabia to seek to enhance its authority in the Gulf, and for its smaller neighbours to seek to ensure that that authority would not be at their expense and would be used to offset in part the greater perceived threat emanating from Iraq and Iran. This, though, was not a hard security alliance. The modest ambitions that lay behind subsequent attempts at military cooperation underscored the fact that member states looked to the GCC more as a kind of political fraternity than as a security pact. While a more clearly defined set of alliances with the USA did not begin to take shape until towards the end of the Iraq–Iran war, the Gulf states had in their different ways looked to the USA as a major extra-regional security guarantor long before the GCC’s creation. Events from 1990 did not so much prevent more coherent intra-GCC cooperation as underline its limitations. The 1991 Gulf War and events since have emphasized how much the organization is a loose association of comparable states superficially integrated but functioning as a high-level interstate body. The GCC has some of the features of a security community, albeit still dominated by intra-governmental initiatives focused on trade and personal mobility and lacking non-

governmental engagement. As an alliance it can often struggle to specify what it is aligned against. However, this is common among Middle East alliances (Walt 1987), even if this one is more substantial than its predecessors. Practical cooperation without constraining the 'sacrosanct' principle of sovereignty looks likely to continue to be the hallmark of the GCC.

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