

SELF-PRESERVATION AND STRATEGIC HEDGING IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

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Small states in the Gulf Cooperation Council have since their independence in the 1960s and 1970s felt that their independent decision-making has been threatened by Saudi Arabia which is the largest, richest, and most populous GCC state. They need to develop policies that allow them to broaden their international engagement in order to hedge against threats, all while fulfilling their duties to the alliance which is the first guarantee of their collective security.

Key findings

- Because of their size, and despite having good economic means, the small states in the GCC have feared the influence of Saudi Arabia on their domestic affairs and international relations.
- Each state devised its own ways to deal with this problem. One bandwagoned with the kingdom, another became a mediator in GCC disputes, and the rest chose to find many regional and international allies and strengthened their militaries.
- Small GCC states should deepen their relationship with the United States and strengthen relations with NATO, the European Union, and world economic powers.

Executive summary

Despite their membership in a single organization—the Gulf Cooperation Council—the small states of the alliance (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE) have had differing degrees of apprehension about being subsumed by their big sister Saudi Arabia which has a larger economy, more population, and a comparatively stronger military. To face this challenge, and depending on their capabilities, each of them has devised ways to preserve its security without breaking away from the GCC’s institutional framework.

Going forward, and however the current crisis pitting Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE against Qatar gets resolved, this fear is likely to continue since the larger states in the Gulf will continue to accumulate economic and military power. Thus the GCC’s small states



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would do well to keep their strategic relationship with the United States and augment it, broaden their bilateral relations with NATO and the European Union, and seek deep diplomatic and economic ties with the rest of the world.

Analysis

The small states of the GCC have had problems with Saudi Arabia which always operated as if it had the ultimate say in how things developed on the Arabian Peninsula. This Saudi *modus operandi* is steeped in the history of the kingdom that took its current shape and geography after a series of conquests by the Al Saud east, north, west, and south of today's capital Riyadh at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is not a stretch to say that had Great Britain withdrawn earlier than 1971 from the areas that make up the GCC's small states today, Saudi conquest would have continued until it occupied the entire peninsula.

After their independence from Great Britain in the 1960s (Kuwait) and 1970s (Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE), some had territorial disputes with Saudi Arabia (Oman, Qatar, and the UAE). Even after these were resolved, the kingdom still found ways to challenge them geographically and economically as the following examples attest. In 2006, the kingdom reneged on a 2003 agreement for building a Qatari gas pipeline through its territorial waters to Kuwait which prompted that letter to import Qatari liquified natural gas by tanker. In 2006 also, Saudi Arabia rejected a proposal for a similar pipeline to the UAE and Oman. Instead, an undersea pipeline was built from Qatar's North Field to the UAE and from there to Oman. In 2009, Emirati citizens were prevented from leaving Saudi Arabia because their ID cards had a map including disputed areas between the two countries.

Even the collective responsibilities and supposedly equal status within the GCC's institutional makeup have been skewed to benefit Saudi Arabia more than the others. A monetary union has for all intents and purposes been scuttled because the kingdom rejected the UAE's request to host the GCC central bank and insisted on hosting it in Riyadh. A joint military force, the Peninsula Shield, could only be located in Saudi Arabia since it had the largest armed forces. In 2011, late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz proposed a GCC full union and the inclusion of Jordan and Morocco in the alliance without even consulting with the other leaders. In 2015, King Salman declared war in Yemen and called upon the others to join in before consulting with them either. And the list goes on.

It goes without saying that the same apprehension exists about Iraqi and Iranian threats to independence and free decision-making. Iraq before 2003 had designs on the small states of the GCC, and indeed invaded Kuwait in 1990. Today, Iraq is more aligned with Iran and powerful Iran-supported militias threaten opening serious channels with the GCC. Since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran relies on an ideological antipathy toward monarchical rule, which is seen as threatening to the small monarchies in the Gulf as well as to Saudi Arabia. Iran also occupies UAE islands in the Gulf and has unsettling military activities in the region.



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These considerations of neighbor challenges and threats increase the strategic vulnerability felt by the small states of the GCC. Their leaders must devise ways to ensure their freedom to choose policy orientations to preserve their regimes' legitimacy and stability and their states' security. Furthermore, specifically since the 2011 Arab Spring protests, there is an urgency imposed by wider regional events such as the rise of Islamist movements, sharp sectarian polarization, and sustained civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

Responses by GCC small states

To differing degrees depending on their economic conditions, historical ties, and incidental security developments, small GCC states have chosen several policy responses. One thing has been common, however: their responses are designed to assure security for their ruling families; i.e., omnibalancing has dominated in their alliance responses.

Bahrain illustrates the least freedom of movement and action vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and has bandwagoned with it regarding all matters. Because of its economic reliance on the kingdom and its leadership's fear of the Shiite majority in the population, Manama has had no option but to rely on Riyadh. By bandwagoing, the Bahraini leadership has shored itself up, especially during the protests of 2011. Today, Bahrain is an ardent supporter of Saudi Arabia in the GCC crisis although it has no powerful policy tools to force its way.

Kuwait has chosen a neutral role within the GCC but augmented it with an emphasis on mediation between GCC states. Its rulers see the importance of having cordial relations with the kingdom and opted to work within the confines of the GCC framework. In the current GCC crisis, Kuwait has been a mediator between the Saudi-led coalition and Qatar and has enlisted American assistance in that task. While it succeeded in resolving a similar crisis in 2014, this time around it found difficulties because of the zero-sum nature of the dispute and the personal animosities of the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini leaders toward Qatar's leadership.

Oman, on the other hand, has always nursed a good degree of scepticism of Saudi Arabian intentions toward the sultanate. Besides working within the GCC's institutions, it has combined neutrality with defiance in regional and international relations. It has excellent relations with Iran with which it shares sovereignty over the Hormuz Strait. It allows British and American troops and navies to use its territories and maritime facilities. It also hosted negotiations between the United States and Iran which led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding the latter's nuclear program, thus incurring Saudi wrath.

Qatar, on the other hand, may be the most audacious in its efforts to escape Saudi pressure and influence. Qatar has extensively and aggressively used what Yoel Guzansky calls strategic hedging: securing relations with many regional and international powers without being fully dependent on any one power. It also employed its foreign policy establishment in mediation efforts outside of the GCC—in Yemen, Lebanon, and Sudan's Darfur region—and facilitated negotiations between the US and the Taliban. Perhaps most important of all, Qatar developed strong relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and hosted its leaders



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while Saudi Arabia (and the UAE) feared the Brothers and worked to topple their regime in Egypt.

Finally, the United Arab Emirates sought over decades to increase its regional and international prestige by using its financial resources and seizing opportunities to establish military relations from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea. Despite its current alliance with Saudi Arabia against Qatar, widening its strategic relations around the Arabian Peninsula must negatively affect Saudi influence. The UAE has military bases in Seychelles, Yemen's Socotra island, Djibouti and Eritrea, maintains robust military relations with Egypt, and practically occupies southern Yemen and controls the Bab al-Mandab waterway.

Policy Advice

As small states in an alliance dominated by Saudi Arabia and abutting two other large states with their hegemonic designs, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE need to devise sure ways to assure their independence and sovereignty. These ways should include:

- In the short term, there should be more committed American and European efforts to resolve the current GCC crisis which pits some of the small states against each other. Bahrain and the UAE should know that bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia does not necessarily obviate their or Qatar's apprehensions about Saudi dominance.
- The small GCC states would do well to try to change the institutional framework of the organization to gain more influence vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.
- Individually, small states in the GCC should strengthen military ties with the United States and NATO and economic ties with the European Union and other states with large economies around the world. The idea is to limit overall dependence on one specific regional or international power.
- Particularly in the Gulf region, small GCC states should always safeguard cordial relations with Iraq and Iran while remaining vigilante about protecting their interests and independence from the two.

Conclusion

In summary, the small states of the GCC have found ways to lessen what they consider to be overwhelming Saudi influence on their affairs and on their foreign policies. They have also avoided being directly pressured by Iraq and Iran. So far, their most successful tool has been a strong strategic relation with the United States which has played a neutral role between them and Saudi Arabia. They would do well by enhancing this relationship with the United States, but should also widen it to relations with NATO, the European Union, and countries with strong economies around the world. Indeed, strategic hedging where they avoid allying with one dominant international power or another should be the common policy for the future.



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