

Worrisome Happenings in the Gulf Cooperation Council

Dr. Imad Harb

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Kingdom of Bahrain have recently made public their long-simmering displeasure with Qatar's foreign policy and withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. They accused Qatar of not adhering to security understandings reached regarding supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab Spring countries, Iranian meddling in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and media (specifically *al-Jazeera*) interference in their domestic affairs. From its side, Qatar regretted the withdrawal of ambassadors, calling it a mistake, and declined to reciprocate; but it insisted repeatedly on adhering to its foreign policy as an independent country. Meanwhile, and each for its own reasons, Kuwait and Oman opted to remain quiet on the matter, reasoning that it is, first, better to remain outside the fray and, second, more fruitful to be uninvolved should the opportunity to reconcile differences between brothers present itself.

But whatever the circumstances and necessary responses, the events over the last few weeks have exposed unwarranted rifts in the GCC alliance. Forged in 1981 primarily as a security hedge in the then-war-atmosphere between Iraq and Iran, Iranian revolutionary fervor, and a not so distant Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the GCC shows an inability to accommodate the differing visions of its constituent states' leaders. Both objective and subjective conditions and circumstances have put these leaders at odds and the loose nature of the alliance has prevented the institutional

mechanisms necessary for addressing the differences.

Objectively, the GCC countries find themselves in a dangerous and unpredictable environment. First and foremost, they to differing degrees fear the omnipresence of the Islamic Republic of Iran which, for all intents and purposes, behaves as if it is on a trajectory for regional dominance. What GCC states had hoped would be American continuous hostility to Iran and vigilance against its designs in the Gulf area proved mistaken as the United States tries to reach a more peaceful outcome to its disagreements with the Islamic Republic. Washington has led the G+5 negotiations in reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, accompanied by at least a partial lifting of sanctions. Ominously for the GCC, the deal does not seem to have included an Iranian commitment not to interfere in the affairs of its neighbors, specifically eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, foment Houthi rebelliousness in Yemen, be involved in the sectarian divide in Iraq and Lebanon, or continue to support Syria's Bashar al-Asad's slaughter of his people. Indeed, the deal seems to have inadvertently given Iran an edge despite forcing it to make unprecedented concessions about its nuclear program.

Another objective condition feeding the state of uncertainty in intra-GCC relations is the reality that Qatar has, since the start of the Arab Spring at the end of 2010, advocated for and supported the Muslim Brotherhood. The presence of Muslim Brothers on Qatari soil, most famous of whom is MB spiritual advisor Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, and the continued *al-Jazeera* media onslaught in support of the Egyptian, Libyan, and Tunisian Islamists

and opposition to the Egyptian army's move against former President Mohammad Morsi, are deviations from official doctrine in GCC countries. Finally, Qatar's support of hardline Syrian rebels outside of the Syrian National Coalition and loosely aligned with al-Qaeda, first, weakens the national and moderate Islamist forces in the Syrian opposition, second, helps deviate efforts and momentum away from the objective of overthrowing al-Asad, and, third, puts al-Qaeda at Jordan's doorstep and that of the GCC.

Subjectively, intra-state matters in the GCC suffer from the lack of institutional mechanisms for resolving differences in official doctrines, personalities, and perceptions. Albeit a loose alliance of similar monarchies, the GCC tends to foster centrifugal tendencies in its members' foreign policies. Common interests are subsumed under individual preferences because of the exigencies of the modern-state system. Qatar seems to have developed a small-state complex of wanting to look larger than it really is, using financial largesse to make up for geographical size and buying influence where it can. Oman has eschewed more collective action, preferring to play quiet mediator with Iran. Bahrain has its own problems while Kuwait is mired in reconciling monarchical rule with a democracy that constantly puts domestic cohesion in peril. And amid this confusion, GCC leaders sit as a council of elders that meets once a year to just sign boiler plate statements. Where the GCC has succeeded most is on some economic issues, and those need time and commitment to bear fruit.

Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini leaders are most upset about the freedom hosted

Muslim Brothers have in Doha mosques and on *al-Jazeera's* airwaves. Brotherhood personalities are allowed to say what they want and entertain no inhibitions about any other Gulf government or official. Al-Qaradhawi himself has gone public many times criticizing the United Arab Emirates, and *al-Jazeera* carried him and his sermons live. Videos pretending to be by Turkish documentary makers have surfaced associating Saudi and Emirati leaders with American and Israeli intelligence. The videos contained no criticism of Qatari relations with Israel, indicating their origin. Doha has also and for a long time hosted the Academy of Change that trains rights and democracy activists. Its Doha branch is headed by none other than al-Qaradhawi's son-in-law, Hisham Mursi. Needless to say, neither the Muslim Brothers nor AoC activists dare criticize rights conditions in Qatar.

What the GCC travails point to are serious problems that need fundamental review and resolution if the alliance is to endure into the future. It would be folly to compare the GCC to the European Union for cultural, historical, and institutional reasons. But EU leaders have found ways to ameliorate differences in individual policy preferences in the service of all-European interests. GCC countries have all the requisite conditions for a similarly effective alliance. No one expects perfect outcomes; but a modicum of common understandings and strategies with well-thought-out institutional arrangements should be a good start.