

TOWARDS A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE GULF: CHALLENGES, CONSTRAINTS AND THREATS

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TOWARDS A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE GULF: CHALLENGES, CONSTRAINTS AND THREATS

The Gulf security architecture has been challenged by factors related to countries' changing internal, regional and international politics over the last many years. There are questions being raised whether the region is heading towards a much awaited implosion or the region will eventually find a new architecture before declining to the much feared chaos. The Gulf Strategic Outlook, as a result, has become an interesting and perhaps most sought-after subject in today's Middle East politics. The current Gulf politics is deeply divided into three camps, Saudi Arabia led quartet (UAE, Bahrain and Egypt), Qatar, and Iran. Regional and international powers have been under pressure to take sides in the three sided regional politics, or attempted to shape the political alliance formations. As the regional security has to respond to threats beyond the traditional threat¹ coming from non-Arab countries such as Iran or Israel, countries are reconfiguring their strategic perception and resetting it for an uncertain yet changing outlook. The key assumptions that defined Gulf countries' strategic perception are being revisited as follows: Changing threat perceptions, new security arrangements and resetting of the regional economic order.

Changing Threat Perceptions

The Gulf ruling elites, the tribal leaders mostly appointed by the British colonial administration to deal with the local security and order,² had no previous experience of running a conceptual modern nation-state³ or an Empire, such as the Ottoman, the Fatimids or the Egyptian state. They were not even the administrators of Ottoman provinces, who gradually assumed full statehood as the ruling and military elite in Basra, Damascus, Egypt, Tunis and Aden provinces emerged. As the Portuguese and British naval forces had started surrounding the Arabian peninsula in later sixteenth century,⁴ the Ottomans were becoming short of resources to maintain their military control over the region, for all good reasons, mainly distance from Istanbul and the Hijaz.

The British Foreign Office was in position to find tribal leaders who were not only ready to challenge the Ottomans but also to replace them gradually. In 1913, the Al Saud family had defeated the Ottomans from Al Hasaa.⁵ Britain also encouraged Qatar and Kuwait to end their limited relations with the Ottomans and accept the British protection. Their struggle to establish a tribal state was different from the struggle of Arab nationalists, mostly inspired by European Enlightenment and modern nation-states. Consequently, the threat perception in the Gulf States was shaped by rather anti-Ottomanism, tribal solidarity and Islamic legitimacy, the three elements that the British Colonialism was ready to offer to the region.

In the late nineties, the British Foreign Office decided to end its colonial control, the tribal leadership started assuming full statehood based on tribal solidarity, religiously driven le-

gitimacy, rentier resources and external security guarantees. The Ottoman Caliphate was abrogated in 1923 and the new Turkish nation-state abandoned its claims in the region. The main threat, could be from the charged emotions of Arab nationalism rallied by the secular Arab elites in Egypt, Syria and Iraq.⁶ Their quest to maintain an Islamic character of their newly established monarchies was also to protect themselves from the tides of nationalism. The creation of state of Israel appeared as the first serious threat to the region when both the Gulf monarchies and the Arab secular republics have to jointly fight against the newly carved out state. This led to the formation of the Arab League in 1945 after Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan signed the Alexandria Protocol on October 7, 1944.

The Arab League was a nationalist project with whom the Saudis had strained relations. Saudi Arabia wanted to have its own Pan-Islamic group (Brynen, Korany, ve Noble 1995, 36), that the formation of OIC in 1969, despite the fact that Israel never confronted with the Gulf States. By 1979, the Pan-Arab nationalism would face a threat coming from the Iranian revolution that would challenge the entire region and primarily the Gulf monarchies and their Islamic credentials. The Gulf monarchies rushed to form a strong Gulf Cooperation Council, that would integrate the six monarchies' economic, political and security institutions, in order to form a common response to the Iranian revolutionary threat.

In Iraq-Iran dispute, they found an opportunity to find an ally in nationalist-Baathist Iraq to discourage Iran's expansionist ambitions and supported Saddam Hussein. The short-lived bonhomie between Gulf Islamism and Arab nationalism ended when Saddam Hussein wanted to realise the Arab nationalist

project by invading Kuwait in 1991.⁷ The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was allowed by the Gulf states mostly because of the mistrust.

The Arab nationalism, Arab-Israel conflict, Iranian revolution failed to destabilise the Gulf region until the next set of threat was to come from the rise of anti-regime sentiments across the region that threatened the stability of Gulf allies, particularly of Egypt. The Arab revolutions were the most serious challenge for the Gulf Kingdoms that enjoyed decades long stability and wealth, thanks to Western security umbrella and the income from natural resources. These Kingdoms, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain were swift in reacting against the revolutionary attempts fearing the spread of these uprisings to their countries.

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates as well as other democratic forces across the Middle East, as an alternative new ruling elite could be the gamechanging outcome of these uprisings, if these uprisings were to be allowed to continue. The Gulf Islamists with whom the region had a prolonged intellectual and Islamic relation, were among those who welcomed the change. And the support to the Arab uprisings lent by Turkey and Qatar hinted a new regional order to come, with democratic forces in the state power. From the Gulf perspective, with an exception of Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood is an irreconcilable political force, unadjustable and unreliable. With this breaking point, the Gulf states changed their course of action in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia by supporting the counter-revolutionary forces or in some cases like Syria more violent and radical forces.

By 2016, Turkey found itself in a heart place in Syria with key Gulf nations supporting anti-Turkey forces, both the PKK-

affiliated groups in Northern Syria and radical groups or Daesh in rest of the country. Turkey was quick in seeing the changes and switched the side to Russia and Iran to de-escalate the conflict through a political and constitutional process. The tripartite Astana Peace Process, if succeeds, will be the first event since the fall of Ottoman Empire that Turkey would be a key player in reshaping the future of an Arab country, that too bypassing its traditional security umbrella of NATO.

In line with this policy direction, Turkey also sided with Qatar in many of the regional developments including the Egyptian revolutionary process and the post-military coup developments, the Syrian civil war and the conflict in Libya. The June 2017 crisis in the Gulf was a turning point in Turkey's relations with Gulf countries. Qatar was subjected to a political and economic boycott by its neighbors, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain for allegedly supporting "terrorist groups" (Muslim Brotherhood) and Iran. Turkey was once again quick in responding to the crisis by completing its pending security agreements and dispatching its training contingent amid high tension between Qatar and the boycotting quartet. Once again, Turkey was acting without NATO and Western security umbrella, with possible coordination of Iran and Russia. The Gulf countries' military adventures in Yemen and Libya were becoming a burden when Libya's UN recognized government requested Turkey's assistance against UAE-supported warlord General Khalifa Haftar. Meanwhile Turkey's close cooperation with Sudan, Somalia and good relations with Kuwait and Oman continued. Amid all these developments, the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul was caught red handed, enough

to embarrass Saudi Arabia internationally. Turkey considered this act as an international humiliation by the Saudi regime as the crime was executed in complete violation of internationally accepted diplomatic conventions on Turkish soil.

These developments brought Turkey and the Gulf countries to an unnecessarily prolonged dispute. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself remained low-profile in criticising Saudi Arabia directly and expressed confidence of his personal relations with the Saudi King in resolving the crisis. But his efforts were limited to internationalize the case as Turkey's Gulf relations were caught in a crisis that Turkey has never expected to happen. Post Qatar crisis, the Gulf quartet had already demanded the reversal of Turkey's Qatar policy as a pre-condition for any normalisation. While his foreign policy team remained open to a rapprochement with Egypt and Saudi Arabia and kept visiting the Gulf capitals to find a way out, Turkey was being pointed as a threat, not as a normal neighbour.

At the helm of changing threat perception in the Gulf quartet are the assumptions that, one, the Muslim Brotherhood related groups wants to overthrow their rules, two, Turkey, Qatar are supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-regime politics, third, Iran, Qatar and Turkey are cooperating in tandem against Saudi-UAE approved regional perspective, and fourth, western response to their security concerns are insufficient, fifth, they need to revise the existing security architecture to make the region inaccessible for powers hostile to them including Iran, Qatar and Turkey. This comes with another change that for countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Israel no longer remains a threat, instead, it can be a partner in establishing a new status quo in the region.

New Security Arrangements

The regional security of the Gulf region was primarily based on non-traditional alliance system that tied the region with a prolonged dependency on the west, mainly the United States and the UK. As far as Israeli threat is concerned both countries have played little role in stopping Israel from expanding its occupation that indirectly weakened the Gulf countries' standing in the Arab world and posed them as the allies of Israel. On threats from Iran, the Gulf was in position to evolve its own mechanism in Gulf Cooperation Council, until the American invasion of Iraq found an undeclared ally in Iran where the top anti-Saddam leadership had been in refuge, to brought back and installed in Baghdad. Iran supported militia and religious leadership made sure the complete wipe out of Sunnis from Iraq's power structure, leaving their regions at the mercy of Sunni militant groups gradually integrated with Al-Qaeda.

The Gulf security found an Iranian threat right at their door forcing Saudi Arabia to seek Iran's isolation on its nuclear program, a goal shared by Israel. The campaign, however, failed and Iran's influence and regional reach expanded from Iraq to Lebanon. Obama's Nuclear Deal was a blow to the Gulf monarchies' as they were confronted with multiple threats emanated from the Arab uprisings.

Qatar's reluctance to recognize the Egyptian coup, that came with exclusion of Qatar from Gulf security architecture drawn by Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama with a possible co-ordination of Washington and Tel-Aviv. This had drawn the basic lines of an upcoming divide in the region. With Qatar boycott in 2017, Qatar was thrown out of Saudi led Arab

coalition force and Qatar was formally rescued by Turkey as the United States waited to offer a quick support. As of now, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are taking lead to carve out an entirely new security architecture while Qatar, Turkey are left with limited choices to bypass the Arab quartet.

Even though Qatar would like to see Turkey play a proactive role in the region, Turkey remains cautious in challenging Saudi Arabia's traditional role and making a decisive comeback to the Gulf politics. President Erdogan leaves no opportunity in taking up the matters directly to the Saudi King and calling him big brother. But that is also because Turkey remains concerned of Iran's unreliable Islamic solidarity, that, Erdogan has been personally attacked by those very close to Iran's ruling class. Ankara as a result relied on Russia to get a rescue plan in Syria and expected the United States to deal with Iranian presence in Syria and Iraq. This is where Turkey and Saudi Arabia has an opportunity to find a common security perception had Saudi Arabia not lent its support to PKK's Syria branch which is controlling Northern Syria with the American help. Ankara's recent moves on Egypt could be seen as his readiness to start usual business if a political compromise is not in sight.

One of the biggest changes in the architecture of Gulf security may be brought by taking some Asian states, namely India, Pakistan and China as an active security partners of the "Reduced Gulf" cooperation council. India is particularly important in this regard. This role has been traditionally occupied by Pakistan until Pakistan it refused to be part of Saudi led Yemen operation. How India can militarily be part of Saudi-led coalition is yet to be decided should India want a public alignment. India has three main obstacles in assuming a

military role in the Gulf region, first, India's military cooperation, in principle, requires a mission to be UN mandated, second, India had yet to find a workable balancing act between various conflicting parties of the Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel,⁸ and third, Israel has assumed an unprecedented weightage in India's security policy that no other Gulf country can replace or compensate it. It seems that Narendra Modi led government has been in position to overcome all three obstacles. Iran-Pakistan rapprochement is worrying not only for India but also for the Gulf countries who had invested huge financial resources to keep Pakistan in their fold. The best demonstration of Pakistan's losing Gulf is its Kashmir policy which failed to get a Saudi statement of support, traditionally, given without delay.

Indeed, China was also supposed to fill the gap left by the United States and the UK. China however sees the Gulf problem through the "US-China competition" (Yoshihara ve Sokolsky 2002) framework rather than "China-India rivalry" point of view. China still remains hesitant to be part of Saudi led security remodeling, instead, it would prefer a more inclusive system that allows both Iran and Pakistan remained an active part of the system as envisioned in its grand Belt and Road Initiative, to which India fiercely oppose. The Belt and Road Initiative has a repercussion for India's global ambitions, reducing India only a junior player vis a vis China. India under Modi, a Hindu nationalist, sees a perfect opportunity to realize India's global ambitions by breaking previous policy assumptions. Pakistan neither has the capability nor the strategic depth to compete with India in its advancing Gulf relations.

Regional Economic Order

The change that the Gulf region has been going through is not purely political and strategic, they assume strong economic underpinnings behind them. First, the region's hegemony as the biggest or the most reliable, cheaper energy supplier has ended. The region no longer control the energy market alone. Russia, the U.S. as the non-Arab players and Iraq, Israel and Egypt have emerged as regional energy players that can supply gas across Europe. Iran despite being under sanctions remains a defiant supplier of energy to India and China, the two biggest energy consumers. Since the last financial crisis in 2008, the oil prices have been in steady decline, affecting the Gulf countries extravaganza construction projects and their deep pockets. The imperative to diversify their economy was never in such urgency as it is now. The UAE, Dubai mainly, could have saved itself from such hurry, but Saudi Arabia needed an economic vision that offers more employment or the Saudi citizens and reduce their dependence on foreign workforce. Saudi Arabia's overhauling its cultural and religious outlook is in response to the changing economic template for the country. To keep Iranian and Iraqi oil out of the market for a long time is not possible for Saudi Arabia, nor can they dictate terms and conditions to set the game in their favor.⁹ The new economy however needs more regional cooperation in order to project Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination, an investment hub. The threat to such a new and liberalized Saudi future see a challenge coming from conservative or moderate Islamic sections in the country and outside. A war on the Muslim Brotherhood becomes both an economic and political war when a force such as the Muslim Brotherhood offers an alternative to their religiously legitimized monarchies.

For past many decades, the deep pockets of the Gulf countries had allowed them to create a regional rentier system that would hire lower and middle class unemployed Arabs from Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Syria, Morocco, Sudan and elsewhere. They offered financial aid to these countries in return for a favorable subordinate regime. With oil revenues declining, the regional rentier circulation was the first victim and the expatriates were the first to be subjected to localization of workforce or the new tax sanctions. The Arab expatriates, along with Asian expatriates have lost their savings in recent years and back at home, their governments and families have faced the heat. Egypt and Sudan have already arrived on a breaking point.

On the other hand, the GCC nationals have not yet acquired enough capabilities to be part of a productive knowledge economy that can compensate the oil revenue losses. Qatar, being a small and energy rich state, has not faced such a huge pressure and its attempts to diversify its economy have started paying off. The boycott situation has brought the country out of Saudi tutelage effectively and allowed the country to exercise a more independent foreign policy that assures its security and energy supplies. Even if Saudi Arabia intends to unilaterally end the blockade, Qatar would as better guarantees and security in exchange. This is the reason why almost all Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Oman have been focusing on their new economic vision that can prepare them for future challenges as well as dynamics of new economic order.

Pre-Conditions of Stability

The ongoing Quartet and quartet-Turkey differences notwithstanding, the Gulf region's security has faced problems

beyond these challenges. Even if Turkey and Qatar stop supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and Iran stops supporting the Houthis, the region's security would not be in position to restore the decaying security architecture. The basic assumptions of the Gulf Security architecture are changing and so is changing the future of Gulf security.

Normalisation of Nation-State

The main source of trouble in most of the Arab states that are facing angry streets is their reluctance to transform the Arab-nation state to a normal nation-state. In all definitions, the Arab nation-states are yet to assume full characteristics of a normal state, that include a working social-contract, a sense of national solidarity and an inclusive social welfare, even if these states do not assume full democratic systems. The main trigger behind the massive Arab uprisings was the fact that the Arab states failed to evolve as normal states. Their militaries and the monarchs have managed to maintain an exceptional state system with the help of excessive securitisation, irrational subsidies, and rentier political economy. The neo-liberal policies were introduced only through crony capitalism or state-dependent private sector, that has further deepened exclusion and rich-poor gap.¹⁰ A normal nation-state in the region may not necessarily bring democracy but it would have an institutionalised and constitutionalised ruling system that will redress public grievances and ensure fundamental rights of their citizens. In a normal state system, the relation between the people and the state would become interactive and more responsive, something that the people of the region have not experienced since decades. The securitization of Arab States has happened only at the cost of people's basic needs and rights to make livelihood and live without fear of state repression.

Regionally Driven Security

Unlike other regions in the world, ASEAN, South Asia or Central Asia, the Gulf region has relied on externally driven security, making the region completely dependent on secret alliances, military and defence import. In recent years, even the military personnel have been reportedly hired by Gulf states from different non-Arab countries to fight in Yemen, Iraq or elsewhere. The external actors, mainly the powerful five UN Security council permanent members, have seen the region from the perspective of energy security. With energy becoming less important in the Gulf-US or Gulf-Europe relations, their security perception as well as priorities are also changing. America's Pivot to Asia and Europe's Russian problem require much of time and resources. Meanwhile, the Gulf region has not yet made up its mind on how to integrate China in the regional security. Bilaterally, each Gulf state is trying to take China on its side, Saudi Arabia, Iran and UAE have, bilaterally, secured close relations with China and India, both the countries, nevertheless, have not opened up themselves for a wider regional role.

A New Economic Order

One of the most important things that has affected the Gulf security is their depleting energy revenues. Saudi Arabia has for the first time in history has posted three budgets in 2015 and 2016¹¹ and in 2019.¹² The growth rate remains sluggish at 1.7 percent. The current rentier economic order is being challenged by many factors, such as that the United States has started exporting oil more than it imports.¹³ Russia's energy profile is expanding, China and India maintains a diversified energy basket policy. With Iraq's energy supplies are

more stable, and other countries' supplies on the rise, the Gulf energy supplies are under immense pressure of both supply and price cut. In case of war with Iran, the energy supply may be briefly interrupted but this would pose serious challenges to countries such as China and India, both fiercely oppose a military confrontation with Iran. The new economic order has been sought by diversifying rentier economies and allow non-oil sectors to grow faster than the oil sector. IMF expects that Saudi economy may grow at 2.9 percent in 2020.¹⁴ The new economic vision 2030 has pushed for radical social and economic reforms that include the introduction of the value-added tax and energy price reforms and extra taxes on immigrants and their families. The new economic order will however affect the regional circulation of remittance as their share in the recipient countries' GDP is declining. Egypt is set to lose a share of remittances from the Gulf region mainly from Saudi Arabia after these reforms. Intra-GCC trade is still the lowest in the world as the countries lack inter compatibility. The region needs to change itself from consumption economy to productive economy so that it reduces its import dependency beyond the region and find more regional cooperation, including that of Iran, Iraq and Turkey which can be Gulf countries' main food suppliers.

Resetting Strategic Perception

As the region is deeply obsessed with domestic security threats emanating from Muslim Brotherhood inspired groups or individuals, their response is never limited to the Muslim Brotherhood and has often targeted every opposition voice. Such a sweeping reaction and such a vague threat perception is neither effective nor sustainable. In the past, the Saudi government and other Gulf monarchies have maintained very

close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates groups, in order to counter-balance the popularity of Arab nationalism of Gamal Abdul Nasser and Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. Under King Fahd and King Abdullah, this relationship continued and Saudi Arabia successfully mediated between Hamas and Al Fatah in 2006 to 2010. In return, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies have enjoyed popular support among the Arab Muslims. By breaking this relationship radically, the Saudis have to convince the Arab public opinion about their relations with Islamists before they brand them as "terrorists". This gives credence to claims that the Muslim Brotherhood is just an excuse to replace the religious legitimacy with a non-religious legitimacy, without being challenged by their own religious establishment.

Another threat perception is based on Iran and the rise of Iran affiliated armed groups that have surrounded Saudi Arabia from Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. The Iranian government's extreme rhetoric against the Saudi government strengthens the environment of mistrust. At international forums, Iran claims that it does not pose any threat to Saudi Arabia, but at domestic politics, it plays with anti-Saudi sentiments. What worries Saudi Arabia in real terms is that there are at least three heavily armed groups that publicly maintain loyalty to Iran, Hezbollah of Lebanon, Ansar al Allah of Yemen, and Al Hashd of Iraq, besides dozens of small groups operating in Syria, Nigeria, Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Saudi frustration of its Western allies is primarily based on their failure to check on these Iranian groups, despite Saudi Arabia's being their primary defence customer and regional ally. Saudi allies in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Syria and other Arab countries have either lost their legitimacy

or on the decline. This has led Saudi Arabia to swiftly act on many fronts, to form a pan Islamic military alliance, to have an Arab military coalition, to have Saudi-UAE strategic partnership, a gradual normalisation of relations with Israel and including Tel-Aviv within the Arab security architecture, and to seek military partnership with non-Western countries such as Russia, China and India. None of such initiatives have yet shown enough progress and have also increased the political, financial and strategic cost of the new security architecture. Yemen has been officially Syrianized after the Saudi supported Yemeni bloc has been challenged by and thrown out from Aden by another UAE backed armed group. The repeated drone and missile attacks from Yemen on Saudi targets, the most humiliating attack was on Aramco facilities on 14th of September 2019.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights that the Gulf security architecture is being challenged from factors that are both external and internal, those that are posed by state actors and non-state actors, by a crumbling social contract and by a stagnant economic and development conditions in the Gulf region's sphere of influence. These conditions have led a revisit of the existing security architecture by Saudi Arabia and its junior regional allies, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Other countries such as Qatar, Kuwait and Oman have been concerned with the over ambitious projects of the Saudi-UAE axis and wish to remain outside of regional hostilities as well as competition. These actors would favor a security architecture, which they can tackle within the scope of their capacity and capabilities.

The viability and sustainability of a new security architecture remains in question as the forces challenging Saudi Arabia-led regional leadership are getting emboldened and the Saudi capabilities to maintain its earlier influence and leadership are declining. Saudi Crown Prince's initiatives to rebuild his country's economic model is yet to take off, his top-down social reforms, however, are questioning Saudi Arabia's religious legitimacy. The trajectory of a new Saudi Arabia is going to be both historic and full of risks something that were once faced by the Kingdom's founder when they successfully combined brought a diverse tribal society under one social contract guided by religious commitments and rental distributions.

Within this context, The Gulf Strategic Outlook both challenges the existing non-traditional security alignments but it also is challenged by the very parameters that its so-called new designers have set out in shaping a newer outlook for the region. That fact requires policymakers and scholars alike to re-consider the shifting alliances and the implications brought about by each country's foreign policy settings. It seems that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain will continue to face challenges from inside and outside in the face of their growing military assertiveness in the region.

End Notes

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