

Of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Union

Written by David B Roberts

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DAVID B ROBERTS, JUL 10 2012

In mid-December 2011 King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called for the Gulf Cooperation Council to move towards “a stage of union in a single entity”. What exactly he meant by this was never officially fleshed out, as is the way in the Gulf where public diplomacy is a rarity. Instead it was left for the editorialists, a few scattered comments by Ministers, and peoples’ fevered imaginations to fill in the blanks particularly in the run up to the following GCC meeting in May 2012.

Stalwart Saudi columnists extolled the virtues of the inevitable fraternal linking of states, their counterparts in the Iranian press castigated this move as divisive and provocative, and Western analysts resolutely pointed out the difficulties inherent in some form of a Union. As the May meeting approached, Riyadh was bedecked with GCC flags for the ceremony, the pro-Union editorials spewed out copy building on a bullish pro-Union speech by Saudi’s Foreign Minister Faisal, and an odd air of expectancy filled the region. Despite the obvious difficulties of such a Union and the myriad problems it would create and cracks it would paper over, it appeared as if through force of will alone Riyadh was going to pull a Unionised rabbit out of the hat.

Yet, to quote Lord Palmerston, states have neither permanent friends nor enemies, only permanent interests, and so it proved. The May meeting proved to be an anticlimactic non-event, with the only outcome being promise of another meeting in December 2012. Clearly the elite in Saudi Arabia colossally misjudged the whole situation.

It seemed to make sense

One can understand the frustration of Saudi’s elite. No country in the Gulf with the possible exception of Qatar at all welcomed the Arab Spring. For Saudi Arabia, a country which has enjoyed spectacular oil receipts for decades yet whose people suffer from profound unemployment, a lack of basic opportunities, badly aging infrastructure not to mention a repressive social atmosphere, the Arab Spring not only forced the Government to crack down in their eastern province but also splurge \$130bn on a palliative budget to stem revolutionary-inspired ideas.

Moreover, on the Kingdom’s door step in Bahrain, the Spring had a deleterious effect on the fragile status quo. The Shia majority who have been economically and socially disenfranchised for generations rose up and were crushed with varying degrees of brutality.

This situation, which Saudi Arabia erroneously believed was caused by Iran, opened up a potentially critical wound right next to Saudi’s own Shia population sitting atop the majority of its oil facilities, which, they feared, could be exploited nefariously by Iran. The fact that America had abandoned so quickly – as Riyadh saw it – a long term ally in Hosni Mubarak in Egypt enraged Saudi Arabia who at some level feared that they too could suffer the same fate. Well, it was reasoned, if America was not going to shore up long-term friendly allies, Saudi would. Duly Saudi Arabia sent over a thousand of its troops and armoured vehicles into Bahrain in February 2011 as a show of force to defend Bahrain ‘against Iran’.

This military support bolstered years of economic support in terms of investment, shared oil receipts, and gifts. The Spring sent Western banks scurrying from Manama deepening Bahrain’s reliance on Saudi Arabia for the foreseeable future. Indeed, given the calm and prosperous shores of Doha and Abu Dhabi but a few miles from

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Manama, there seems little chance that these western banks will return to Manama. Not only is Bahrain's future, therefore, resolutely tied to Saudi Arabia but the ruling Sunni Al Khalifah family, facing such stiff internal issues, are doubly likely to rely on their fraternal Saudi brethren for support, particularly given the Iranian menace's lurking stature (in Bahraini and Saudi eyes at least).

Quotes from the Bahraini King's spokespeople even emerged just before the May meeting talking about the need to meet future challenges with "a more united front". Yet it was not to be.

As for notions that the shared Iranian menace that all Gulf States face would force the smaller States to join Saudi Arabia in forming a protective Union similarly proved to be wide of the mark. This, despite examples of Iranian perfidy perennially peppering leaders' speeches, Iranian spy rings being caught in Kuwait on several occasions, Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops attacking Qatari unmanned rigs in the shared gas field and any number of bellicose speeches emerging from the Iranian Parliament and Press.

Rhetoric versus reality

It is rather easy for the Arab Gulf States to agitate in one form or another about Iran's perfidy. Such a policy is extremely popular domestically plugging into thousands of years of cultural, religious, political, and social animosity. It also neatly fits into modern political and regional dynamics and one can easily find some tangential evidence relating to Iran's nefarious tentacles when necessary.

While the small Gulf States would like some form of reassurance against the Iranian threat – however they perceive it – there is an opportunity cost to be calculated. Specifically, while Iran poses some kind of threat, so too do the smaller states detect some kind of threat from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the regional Arab behemoth. Historically, politically and in terms of the basic building blocks of traditional power reckoning (population, country size, military might, economic sway) Saudi Arabia has long dominated the region. The smaller states, though they pack a post-modern punch themselves in various ways with their soft power ventures and such, nevertheless harbour concerns regarding Saudi's sheer size and overbearing policies as evidenced in their Gulf Union push.

Additionally, a key but often overlooked facet is the insecurity throughout the newer, smaller Gulf States pertaining to their national identities. These states, it must not be forgotten, derive from essentially the same kind of cultural, familial, tribal, societal, economic, and religious background. There is until recently, therefore, little to necessarily differentiate a Qatari from an Emirati from a Saudi. The differences that have emerged in recent years in terms of the growth of a new identity with which to identify would be challenged and even eroded in the longer term were pan-regional ties to be emphasised at the expense of the sub-regional states.

Also, despite the often dire pronouncements in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama about Iran and its actions, it is difficult to escape the utility of these policy ploys. In short, whether the leaders genuinely believe that the Iranian threat is as dire as they maintain or whether they merely believe that by hyping such a threat this offers an easy way to galvanise and distract their domestic constituencies, is open to question. One could see a cost benefit emerging where the 'threat' posed by Saudi Arabia outweighs any *realistic* threat of Iran.

And this is not the first time that the Gulf States have undertaken policy by knee-jerk reaction. After the shattering invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 the GCC launched the 'Damascus Declaration'. This was a plan to station Syrian and Egyptian troops in the Gulf to boost the deterrence of the region. In return the GCC States would undertake massive investments in the troop-sending countries. Needless to say, much like the recent notion of expanding the GCC to include Morocco and Jordan, this idea went nowhere and was quietly dropped.

Looking Forward

Many would note that the notion of a Gulf Union is not dead, merely that the decision has been moved towards the end of the year. Yet when the UAE, Oman, and Kuwait have shown such intransigence thus far, there is little realistic expectation that they will submit themselves to anything approaching a meaningful Union agreement. There are two

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clear conclusions to draw from this Unionising motion.

Firstly, that Saudi Arabia appears to believe its own rhetoric too much. The evils of Iran have been doing the Majlis rounds in Saudi Arabia for generations and it seems likely that the distinction between rhetoric and reality has been blurred. And while Saudi Arabia – the Lenny of the Gulf – may think that it is offering altruistic support to its allies, it must not forget that it looms large and is intimidating in its own right.

Secondly, while other Gulf States may over-hype the Iran threat sporadically for domestic purposes, there is nevertheless some sense of threat felt by all of the smaller Gulf States. With the swift refusal to discuss a tighter arrangement the other Gulf States signal the result of their cost benefit calculation falling firmly on the side of the status quo; to wit, that the fact that America is the key guarantor of security. With huge air fields, ports, and other facilities full of thousands of US personnel not to mention the world's most advanced fighter jets and warships backed up by the most powerful military force ever seen, unsurprisingly, the smaller Gulf States don't feel the need to run to Saudi Arabia, with its expensive but poorly trained forces. Only when this dependency upon America and its guarantees changes will the Gulf States move in the direction of meaningful closer cooperation.

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David B Roberts has lived, studied, and researched throughout the Middle East, including several years spent in Kuwait and Qatar. He is currently the Deputy Director of the Royal United Services Institute's (RUSI) Qatar office and completing his PhD at Durham University. In addition to writing various book chapters; numerous op-eds and analysis articles typically focusing on the Gulf (Kuwait Times, Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, Daily News Egypt etc), he is frequently sought for commentary by the international print, TV and radio media (Al Jazeera, The Financial Times, Reuters, BBC etc). He is also the author of thegulfblog.com, and a former President for the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies graduate section.