

# The Arab Spring's spillover and Gulf security in transition

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During 2011, a wave of popular protests and intensifying opposition to authoritarian governance began to sweep the Middle East and North Africa. What developed into the Arab Spring led to the rapid fall of longstanding presidential regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and posed an existential challenge to leaderships in Syria and, to a lesser extent, Bahrain. Popular anger at economic stagnation and political repression intersected with a disenchanting youthful population wired together as never before. Its size and contagious overspill distinguished the civil uprisings from other expressions of discontent.<sup>1</sup> They also revealed the narrow social base of support underpinning longstanding authoritarian rulers, and their reliance on the use of coercion or the threat of force.

## Beyond North Africa

The popular mobilization did not spare the GCC states, although the nature and depth of protest varied widely within the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, Kuwait, Qatar and parts of the United Arab Emirates were relatively less affected by the instability than Bahrain, Oman, and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

The civil uprisings shook the political economy of authoritarian state structures across the Arab world. Mohamed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation tapped into powerful feelings of helplessness among youthful populations lacking sufficient opportunities for employment or advancement. Additionally, it widened an intergenerational gap between rising demands and the perceived failure of gerontocratic regimes to manage or meet expectations. The spread of the unrest to Bahrain and (to a lesser degree) Oman indicated that mounting discontent affected those GCC states where the population enjoys different degrees of opportunities also according to their religious confession.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the Gulf States share many of the same conditions – bulging young populations, high youth unemployment and imbalanced labor markets, and authoritarian regimes' reluctance to open up to meaningful political reform – that characterized the protests in Egypt and Tunisia. An example is unemployment among Saudi nationals between the ages of 20-24, which was a reported 38.4% in 2008, with the figure rising to 72% for women alone.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Coates-Ulrichsen, Held and Brahimi, "The Arab 1989?" *Open Democracy*, 11 February 2011.

2 *Gulf States Newsletter*, 900 (13 May 2011), p.1.

3 Baldwin-Edwards, "Labour Immigration and Labour Markets in the GCC Countries: National Patterns and Trends", *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States* 15 (2011), p. 20.

Globalizing pressures also played a significant role in creating an enabling environment for the expression of popular frustration. The appearance of a form of “global politics” occurred alongside the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT). This created new forms of private, public and increasingly virtual spaces in which to mobilize, organize and channel societal demands.<sup>4</sup> Political bloggers were active during the parliamentary elections in Bahrain in 2006 and Kuwait in 2008 and 2009, while online youth networks were important organizers of the “Orange movement” that secured important changes to the electoral process in Kuwait in 2006.<sup>5</sup> Facebook, Twitter, Skype and Blackberry Messenger emerged as forums for debate, coordination and unregulated exchanges. In addition, *Al Jazeera’s* coverage of the Egyptian uprising spread transformative images of largely peaceful demonstrations defying political suppression and refusing to submit to the security regimes that had kept authoritarian leaders in power. This was immediately evident in Bahrain, where cafes that usually showed Lebanese music videos instead aired non-stop footage from the enormous demonstrations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.<sup>6</sup>

### **Society, new technologies, governments**

These new forms of media and communication had the greatest impact on a technology-savvy youth. Their synthesis eroded the system of controls and filters constructed by ministries of information and official government media outlets. Significantly, they constituted social as well as technological phenomena as powerful agents of social change and political empowerment.<sup>7</sup> The social dimension of the Arab Spring has transformed notions of entitlement and demands for social justice, public accountability, and political freedoms. Yet official responses in the GCC states combined governmental handouts with crude attempts to censor and harass oppositional activists. Pre-emptive domestic responses encompassed “gifts” of money (Kuwait and Bahrain), the creation of additional jobs in already-saturated public sectors (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Oman), sizeable wage increases (Saudi Arabia) and social welfare redistribution (UAE). Even Qatar, with its fortuitous combination of substantial revenues and a small national population, announced a record-breaking 2011-12 budget, while Saudi Arabia’s \$130 billion package of spending measures represented a sum larger than any national budget up until 2007.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Murphy, “ICT and the Gulf Arab States: A Force for Democracy?”, in *Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies*, ed. Ehteshami and Wright (2008), p. 183.

5 Herb, “Kuwait: The Obstacle of Parliamentary Politics”, in *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Teitelbaum (2009), p. 153.

6 Interviews with Bahraini activists in London, March and June 2011.

7 Chia, “Social Media’s Role in Revolt: A Technological Or Social Phenomenon? – Analysis”, *Eurasia Review News & Analysis*, 22 March 2011.

8 Hertog, *Costs of Counter-Revolution*.

The great difficulty facing regimes is that technocratic solutions no longer suffice to meet (or extinguish) demands from populations wired together as never before. They also lock government spending into incrementally higher levels and create hostages to fortune should oil prices ever fall substantially.<sup>9</sup> Domestic stability has closely been linked to the possession of substantial reserves of hydrocarbons that enabled ruling elites to co-opt opposition and spread wealth, but they will not last forever. Moreover, governments in the Gulf are uneasily aware that significant numbers of relatively less-well-off nationals and pockets of relative hardship exist.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, stability is more fragile and transient than regimes would care to acknowledge, and the violent tensions in Bahrain are indicators of the troubled transition to an eventual post-oil era that lies ahead.

### **The security dimension**

In addition to these very considerable domestic challenges, Gulf States' reactions to the Arab Spring demonstrated how intertwined were local, regional and global considerations in framing the policy-response. The GCC intervention into Bahrain in March 2011 preceded by one week the international community-led intervention into Libya. The two developments revealed how an ostensibly similar principle – in this case, of intervention – can mean very different things in contrasting contexts to actors with diverging motivations and objectives. In Bahrain, 1,000 Saudi Arabian troops and 500 police from the United Arab Emirates crossed the King Fahd Causeway at the invitation of the ruling Al Khalifa family on 14 March. This “GCC force” signaled that Saudi Arabia was not willing to permit the pro-democracy campaign in Bahrain to endanger the position of the ruling family.<sup>11</sup>

Just days later after the move into Bahrain, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, authorizing measures to protect the civilian population in Libya from the Gheddafi regime's onslaught against Benghazi and its eastern territory. While largely-Western (and subsequently NATO-) led, Qatar played an instrumental role in rallying Arab support for the adoption of the No-Fly Zone at the UN. It also dispatched Mirage fighter jets to participate in its military enforcement in a powerfully symbolic act. Moreover, Qatar was one of the first states to recognize (and finance) the opposition Transitional National Council in Benghazi, and Qatar Petroleum provided them with vital gasoline, diesel and other refined fuels, as well as direct military assistance and supplies.<sup>12</sup> This high-profile role was consistent with Qatar's carving out a global profile in the strategic niches of diplomatic mediation and conflict resolution in recent years.<sup>13</sup>

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9 Ibid.

10 *Gulf States Newsletter* 906 (5 August 2011).

11 Jones, “Bahrain, Kingdom of Silence”, *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 4 May 2011.

12 *Gulf States Newsletter* 903 (24 June 2011).

13 Gulbrandsen, *Bridging the Gulf*, pp. 27-28.

The difficulty facing the Gulf States, and Qatar in particular, is one of squaring the ostensibly-divergent choices to support the authoritarian status quo in one instance while materially and financially assisting the opposition to dictatorship in another. Qatar did not send personnel to Bahrain yet its membership of the GCC leaves it open to accusations of double standards and guilt by association. The UAE, which did send police to Bahrain, was also active in the initial stages of the Libya campaign. Abu Dhabi hosted a meeting of the International Contact Group on Libya in June 2011 to discuss the transition to a democratic post-Gaddafi Libya, while Kuwait pledged \$180 million in funding to the Transitional National Council.<sup>14</sup> Yet, in parallel to these moves (which included qualified support for a change of leadership in Yemen and Syria), the GCC positioned itself as a counter-revolutionary bulwark to the Arab Spring where it threatened to clash with their regional interests. This was led by Saudi Arabia and the surprise announcement in May 2011 of possible expansion to include the two remaining Arab monarchies of Jordan and Morocco. It also included a domestic clampdown of political discussion and oppositional activism in the UAE.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Gulf brand?**

These measures might undermine the GCC states' "global branding" initiatives. Much of the Gulf States' "strategic visions" revolved around their self-portrayal as secure places to do business in an otherwise unstable region, yet they remain vulnerable to external perceptions that stability is a façade resting on unsteady foundations. Outbreaks of civil resistance and repressive responses provide succor to skeptics of their global rise, with reactions to the Bahraini crackdown a case in point. In the short-term, immense damage was done to Bahrain's international credibility with the cancellation in 2011 of flagship events such as the Formula One Grand Prix and the Volvo Golf Champions tournament, as well as keynote international conferences such as the Bahrain Global Forum and the Manama Security Dialogue.<sup>16</sup> More in the longer term, the "Business-Friendly Bahrain" image (and slogan) that formed the cornerstone of Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030 has been shredded, with international firms relocating to Qatar and Dubai and reassessing proposals to open regional hubs in Bahrain.<sup>17</sup>

These were significant blows that will reverberate across the region, not least by undermining the Gulf States' aggressive self-branding as tourist-and investment-friendly destinations. Qatar and Abu Dhabi pioneered the strategy of attracting world-class sporting events and establishing themselves on the lucrative MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) tourism and trade fairs circuit. In Abu Dhabi, the domestic

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14 *Al Jazeera English*, 9 June 2011.

15 Kinninmont, "The Maybe Greater GCC", *Foreign Policy*, 16 May 2011.

16 *The Guardian*, 8 June 2011.

17 [www.arabianbusiness.com](http://www.arabianbusiness.com), 28 April 2011.

crackdown had immediate repercussions. Both the Guggenheim and New York University faced sustained criticism in the form of an artists' boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi over poor treatment of laborers, and academics' and students' protests from the parent campus of NYU at the detention of an Emirati academic linked to the Abu Dhabi branch of the Sorbonne (which remained resolutely and embarrassingly silent after his arrest).<sup>18</sup>

Globalizing flows represent a challenge to the GCC states as well as an opportunity. They enable the Gulf States to maximize their leverage in rebalancing global geo-economic power while also inject new political and social pressures into the domestic and regional landscape. Powerful forces of communication and interconnectedness are giving voice to the new "global politics" as citizens across the Arab world mobilize in support of economic and social justice and political accountability and participation. The Gulf States find themselves caught between two paradoxical trajectories; able to project their influence and shape changing global institutions and structures, while susceptible to domestic contestation arising from the interlinking of local discontent with regional and international pressures for reform.

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18 Ross, "Middle East: Rights, Freedom and Offshore Academics", *University World News* 169, 1 May 2011.