The Holy Alliance of Gulf Cooperation Council

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Outline:

I. Introduction
II. A reaction to regional crises
III. Revolutionary abroad, repressive at home
IV. Internal rivalries & non-unified strategy
V. Conclusion
The Holy Alliance of GCC

I. Introduction

In his book “Diplomacy”, Henry Kissinger claims that the European balance of power (1815-1848) has emerged in order to contain France and its revolutionary and nationalist ideas. He defines balance of power “as arranging of affairs so that no state shall be in position to have absolute mastery and dominance over the others”\(^1\). As a result a Holy alliance was formed between the three conservative monarchies; Russia, Prussia and Austria, later Britain joined. The alliance turned to be a symbol of repression of liberal, nationalist, and revolutionary movements in all over Europe. These empires were composed of multinational ethnic groups, thus these movements were seen as threat and dangerous. The Holy alliance used religion to boost its legitimacy. Hence the alliance was based on the principles and values of Christianity and used this idea to counter the principles of “Equality, Liberty and Fraternity”.

In 1981 the Gulf Cooperation Council was formed in response of regional revolutions and events. Saudi Arabia Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and UAE declared that the GCC is established in view of the special relations between them, their similar political systems based on Islamic beliefs, joint destiny and common objectives\(^2\). To deter the Iranian exported Shi’a revolutionary ideas, the Sunni monarchs of Gulf formed their holly alliance as a counterrevolutionary step. Thus it was the fear, that the Shias in the Gulf could rebel against their monarchies, drove them to form an alliance. These monarchies were conservative and like the European Holy alliance, they too used religion, Sunni Islam, to boost their domestic legitimacy. But the GCC faces many difficulties and obstacles. My paper will analyze these problems and divide it into three consecutive parts by using a comparative theory to compare the phases between GCC and European Holy alliance, Concert of Europe.

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\(^1\) Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy, New York, 1994, p.68
First, the formation of GCC was reaction rather than a calculated rational initiative. The inability of the GCC Peninsula Shield to deter the Iranian revolution, consequences of Iraqi-Iranian war and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the reliance of GCC over Western military support raised many questions on the effectiveness of the organization. Second, the spread of “Arab Spring” movements within the borders of GCC concerned the conservative monarchs. They used the strategy of double standard. Supporting such movements outside their borders to change and shape the balance of power in the Arab world and oppressed these movements within their borders. Finally the internal rivalries between its members and the non-unified strategy challenged the progress of GCC. Based on this analysis, I will raise the question whether the GCC will be effective organization in the near future or not?

II. A reaction to regional crises

The Napoleonic forces in 1815 were already defeated and France was in a weak position. In order to prevent the reemergence of a strong France, the aristocratic monarchies of Russia, Austria and Prussia, later Britain determined to establish a stable conservative order. This meant holding French power in check, and preventing new major wars and radical change via revolutions. In similar conditions the GCC was established; The Iranian Revolution of 1979, 8 years of disastrous Iraqi-Iranian war and the Gulf war, all these events shaped the emergence of the GCC, but always they failed to check the power of their regional rivals.

The formation of GCC was a Saudi initiative to confront the security challenges of Gulf area collectively. The main objective was to protect its members from the threat posed by the Iran-Iraq War and Iranian inspired expansionist Islamic Revolutionary ideologies. The fall of the Iranian Shah raised doubt on the United States as a reliable ally, leaving the weak Gulf monarchs unprotected against the export of Iran's revolution which was seen as a severe threat to their national security. The Arab autocracies of the Gulf did not want to share the Shah’s fate. Most

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4 Mohammed Ayoob, The GCC shows its true colors, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/16/the_gcc_shows_its_true_color](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/16/the_gcc_shows_its_true_color), 24/12/2012
GCC monarchs were ruled by Sunni dynasties and have a Shia minority which is oppressed such as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

The Iraqi-Iranian war that began in September 1980 and lasted till 1988 worried the Gulf monarchies. The GCC states considered revolutionary Iran a greater potential threat, due to its radical Islamic ideology and its special appeal to Shi’as, so it backed Iraq, the lesser of two evils. The GCC supported financially and militarily the Sunni-Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq which built a huge military arsenal. The Gulf monarchies concerned of the outcome of the war and the flame may reach their borders, in 1984 their defense ministers agreed to create a two-brigade (10,000-man) Peninsula Shield Force. The headquarters of this joint intervention force was based in Saudi Arabia under the command of a Saudi officer\(^5\).

Their lack of capacity to protect the GCC its members against external threats was clearly demonstrated in 1990 when Iraq invaded and occupied a member state, Kuwait. Despite the billions spent by Saudi Arabia to buy heavy weaponry from the United States, the kingdom was forced to invite about half million American troops to defend itself and eventually force Iraq out of Kuwait\(^6\). In addition, GCC demanded the station of Syrian and Egyptian troops in the Gulf under the umbrella of a “Pan-Arab” “Damascus Declaration”\(^7\). It was clear that the Gulf monarchies, above all Saudi Arabia, the largest and most powerful among them, were incapable of defending themselves against external threats, actual or presumed, without American boots on the ground.

\(^6\) Jane Kinninmont, The maybe greater GCC, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/16/the_maybe_greater_gcc](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/16/the_maybe_greater_gcc), 26/12/2012  
After the defeat of Sadam’s regime in Iraq, and the withdrawal of US troops from the country, Iraq went under the influence of Iran. The GCC had committed a strategic mistake, by supporting the defeat of one of its external rivals; it changed the balance of power of the Gulf towards Iran. Thus Iran became the hegemonic power in the region, threatening the Persian/Arab Gulf. The Gulf Monarchs are afraid of Iran’s nuclear program. Although some of GCC members host US navy fleets and forces, yet they are not sure if US will keep its commitments towards them. If Israel or the United States launches a war against Iran, the GCC states will be caught in the crossfire and will be the most likely target for Iranian retaliation. If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, nervous GCC monarchies will become even more scared and may well rush to deploy US troops, something which will threaten their already alarmed relations with Iran\textsuperscript{8}.

Thus the establishment of the GCC was in large measure a reaction of Gulf monarchies to the Iranian revolution of 1979 in which people’s power toppled the strongest autocracy in the Gulf region. While the war between Iraq and Iran lead to the need of formation a deterrent force

\textsuperscript{8} Marc Lynch, Will the GCC stay on top?, http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/12/15/will_the_gcc_stay_on_top , 20/12/2012
against a coming war. This force failed in its mission to retaliate an external aggression, by relying on foreign forces, but two decades later the same force was used to repress an internal conflict in the region.

III. Revolutionary abroad, repressive at home

The GCC like the European Holy alliance played the game “double standard” to protect its interests in the region. The treat of nationalism and liberalism was an alarm to both Austria and Russia, which were composed of multi-ethnic empires. The Austrian monarch, supported by the Russian tsar, oppressed the ethnic rebellions of Italians, Croats, and Serbs. Meanwhile, Russia was marginalizing its ethnic minorities in Caucasus and Central Asia. But this doesn’t prevent them to support the Greek revolution and its independence from their historical rival the Ottoman Empire. Similarly the GCC used “double standard”, by supporting the uprisings outside their borders (Libya and Syria) and repressing them from inside (Bahrain and Saudi Arabia)

Saudi Arabia is against regime change in allied states. It supports its fellow monarchs for its own domestic regime security, ideological solidarity, and balance of power politics. It might not like democracy much, at least not at home, but that does not mean it will oppose all democratic movements outside its region. It supports March 14 coalition in Lebanon and the Syrian opposition based on sectarian and political considerations. Syrian regime is Iran’s most strategic and longest-standing Arab Ally. Therefore a change in regime in Syria, and installing a Sunni government there, means that Iran’s influence will weaken in the Levant region and the power will shift towards Saudi Arabia. Thus Saudi Arabia and GCC will oppose leaders and groups that they think are allied with Iran, whether it is Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, or Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. Their focus is on checking Iranian influence in the Arab world. That is what drives their policy, not some imagined notion of antirevolutionary dictatorial solidarity. The Saudis see Iranian power in more political than military terms. It is Iranian

Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution; 1789-1848, United Kingdom, 1962, p. 132
political influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine that worries them, not the prospect of the use of Iranian military force. They see the Iranian threat to the Gulf States as centered in Iran’s power to mobilize support among Shiite sympathizers in those states, not in the prospect of an Iranian missile attack. The “Arab Spring” reached the borders of most GCC members, most importantly were the events in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Opposition activists mostly Shia’s organized small protests in the Eastern region of the Saudi Kingdom, demanding socio-economic and political reforms. Under the pretext of the war on terror, the Saudi regime enjoyed a free hand. The monarchy imprisoned peaceful activists, bloggers, lawyers, and academics and jailed them and used force to crack down the peaceful protests. While the king claimed that Islam forbids protests. Meanwhile, Prince Saud al-Faisal, the kingdom’s usually reserved foreign minister, warned that the regime would “cut off any finger” raised against it in protest. Saudis watched in silence while the outside world either remained ignorant to abuses of human rights or turned a blind eye in front of oil and arms deal with the kingdom. In March 11, the Saudi regime argued that a foreign hand was at work. As Prince Saud claimed, “We will not tolerate any interference in our internal affairs by any foreign party ... and if we find any foreign interference, we will deal with this decisively.” The regime has long claimed that its Shiite community, numbering perhaps as many as 1.5 million people, is under the Iranian influence. Even though Saudi Shiites insist on their loyalty to Saudi Arabia, their government has found it

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12 F. Gergory Gause, What Saudis really think about Iran, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/05/06/what_saudis_really_think_about_iran](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/05/06/what_saudis_really_think_about_iran), 22/12/2012
useful to manipulate sectarianism in order to prevent the possibility of a unified national reform front. As the Bahraini uprising broke out in February 14, 2011, Riyadh turned Bahrain the first great battlefield of the counterrevolution. Saudi Arabia drew a line against the spread of democracy protests into the Gulf. Bahrain is ruled by a minority of Sunni elites, while the majority, Shias (70%) are oppressed and denied from the public sector. On March 14, by the demand of Bahraini monarch, the GCC Peninsula Shield entered the county “to bring peace and security”. The intervention force together with Bahraini forces attacked the protesters and repressed them. The Bahraini crisis took a sectarian form. While The Ministerial Council of the GCC justified the intervention by claiming Iran should stop to interfere in the domestic affairs of Gulf States and destabilize their security. For its part, the Iranian regime has responded to the events in Bahrain, by calling GCC’s step as an “occupation” and “invasion”. It’s hypocritical for an absolute monarchy that had sent troops to Bahrain and continued to crack down the peaceful protests to call a fellow dictator to stop oppressing his people. The GCC used double standard in order to “clean” the region from Iranian influence. But one thing is clear that the voice of popular demands can’t be silenced by the use of force. Today about 40% of Saudi youth between ages 20-24 are unemployed. Such a crisis is unacceptable in one of the richest kingdoms in the

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world. Therefore it is in the interest of conservative Gulf monarchs to introduce reforms and
satisfy its citizens before it’s too late.

IV. Internal rivalries & non-unified strategy

Few collective projects have been accomplished; most of the arrangements of GCC has been
signed and achieved by bilateral agreements between its member states. Bilateral agreements
solved several border conflicts, which was the most threatening problem within the GCC, such as
the borders between Saudi Arabia and both Oman and UAE\textsuperscript{19}. Furthermore Gulf ruling elites
mistrust is another problem. Most GCC member states see themselves as young nation-states;
therefore they are not ready to give up their sovereignty to a regional organization. For GCC
members it’s much easier to agree on “low politics” such as economic and social issues rather
than “high politics” related to sovereignty and hard power\textsuperscript{20}. That is why usually small countries
try to block the decisions of the hegemonic power of Saudi Arabia and make a balance within the
organization. Moreover, the project over a common currency doomed for failure due to the
dispute between UAE and Saudi Arabia over the location of headquarters of the central bank.
Usually relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been always tense. Qatar has proposed
many times to build a bridge to have a land connection with UAE, but this plan was vetoed by
the Saudis. After 2006, as the regional balance shifted towards Iran, Qatar played a pro-active
foreign policy and took a mediating role. The Qataris approached to the Syrian regime, the rivals
of the Saudi Kingdom in the region, this process angered the Saudi ruling elites and looked
suspicious to the Qatari steps, declaring that the Qataris are bringing Iran’s influence to the
region and counterbalancing Saudi Arabia\textsuperscript{21}. As the Arab Uprisings broke out, rivalries within
the GCC reached its pick; Qatar started publicly supporting the opposition movements, and
especially the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Saudis with hesitation were supporting Mubarak’s
regime and the Syrian opposition, for political and regional reasons, while the UAE was

\textsuperscript{19} Turki al-Hamad, Will the Gulf Monarchies Work Together?, Middle East Quarterly, March 1997,
http://www.meforum.org/340/will-the-gulf-monarchies-work-together, 1/1/2013

\textsuperscript{20} Christian Koch, The GCC as a Regional Security Organization, KAS International Reports, 11/2010, p.29
launching a “crusade” against the Muslim Brotherhood and imprisoning its members in the country.

The inability of GCC to collectively deter the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and its military reliance on US raised many questions. It became clear that each member has its own view regarding how a joint military force should be structured and what will be its aim. Saudi Arabia which maintains the headquarters of the Peninsula Shield provided the military forces and arms and hopes that this Shield will emerge as deterrence force against any future external threat, Iraq or Iran. This idea is shared by Oman. On the other hand, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and UAE look towards Western support. NATO tried to deepen its military ties with the members of GCC, after a partnership program was made in Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2004. Till now, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE and Qatar have accepted the offer. Kuwait’s experience during the Iraqi invasion shows that the GCC forces are incapable to protect a member state without Western backing. Bahrain and Qatar already host US military bases that protect them from any external attack. UAE is in trouble with Iran and three of its islands are occupied, but as it sees that the GCC is unable to solve this issue it is moving to get the support of Western states. NATO’s presence in the Gulf area concerns both Saudi Arabia and Oman. Saudi Arabia is traditionally conservative in forming military alliances, preferring bilateral agreements such as its military alliance with US. The Kingdom is also aware that any further rapprochement with the West, may threaten the legitimacy of the ruling elites in the eyes of radical Islamist clerics. This action also may provoke an Iranian counter-action by destabilizing its Saudi Arabia’s Eastern region, mainly populated by Shiites. Also Oman didn’t accept the NATO offer due to its close relations with Iran and “balanced” foreign policy.

Therefore the internal conflicts and non-unified vision towards a GCC joint military force is one of the obstacles that is making GCC a dependent security alliance, rather than an independent actor in the region.


22 An Emirati vision for NATO’s Gulf strategy, RUSI Analysis, 5 November 2009, [http://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=commentary&ref=C4AF2CAD7E7536#.UOOE8uSnInM](http://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=commentary&ref=C4AF2CAD7E7536#.UOOE8uSnInM), 1/1/2013
V. Conclusion

The formation of GCC was already a response of regional conflicts, though Saudi Arabia succeeded in creating a conservative “Sunni bloc” against the Iranian revolutionary ideas, but it failed to protect its member during the 1990 Gulf war. Therefore it’s the collective interest of these monarchs to strengthen their military capacities and normalize their relations with neighboring countries and decrease tensions. Moreover, the internal conflicts, rivalries, lack of trust, reliance on the West and their lack of long term planning and strategies is weakening the GCC. Meanwhile, one can’t deny that GCC states aren’t feeling the impact of the latest protest movements in the Arab street. Already sectarian polarization reached its climax in Bahrain which led to the intervention of the GCC forces. On the other hand, the protests in Saudi Arabia should not be overlooked; they may take a sectarian form. GCC countries should change their strategy; by supporting anti-regime protests they are endangering their conservative monarchies, thus they should take necessary steps for socio-economic and political reform and overcome on sectarian tensions. If we go back to history, during the era of Concert of Europe, we can see that legitimate demands of the people will sooner or later prevail over the interests of the ruling elites. The
conservative political order of Europeans monarchs that was developed after the Congress of Vienna (1815) collapsed within 35 years. Between 1848 and 1849, Europe once again was shaken by revolutionary movements, and the streets of France, Austria, Germany, and Italy witnessed rebellions and protests which forced the conservative monarchs to liberalize their political systems. The Holly alliance and the Concert didn’t survive. It seems that the GCC will not be effective organization in the near future. Since, if the GCC can’t overcome on its internal and regional crises and doesn’t take crucial steps towards reforms, the Holy alliance of GCC may take the path of the European Holy alliance.
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