

## **Social Engineering vs. Democratic Reform: The Search for Appropriate Platform to the Upcoming Earthquake in the Gulf Cooperation Council's Region**

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### **Abstract**

Arab spring, "global political awakening" will be written as one of the most significant moments of the beginning of this century. Starting in Tunisia the revolution has swept across the Arab World. However, once that these wave of political, economic and social demands reached the complex Gulf Region things have changed.

Countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council-(GCC) have applied unique double standard reaction to the Arab protests. On one hand they have supported Arab Spring elsewhere including in Yemen. On the other hand domestically GCC' countries have employed Shia-Sunni rift and threat from Iran's hegemonic regional ambition to justify not just military intervention and support to Bahrain's monarchy but also domestic interventions. Complex securities, religious, economic and social relationship in the Gulf accompanied by the U.S. strategic interests give small chances for democratic transformation in the near future. Nevertheless recent U.S. concerns about GCC's countries domestic reaction to the people's demands is clear message that something needs to be done. The article suggests that social stability is the platform that needs to be build if the GCC and U.S. are about to prevent upcoming earthquakes in the region.

*Key words: Gulf Cooperation Council, Sunni-Shia rift, Social engineering, Arab Spring, Iran*

### **1. GCC Countries Meet the "Arab Spring"**

The wave of Tunisian political strives for change, in December 2012, has swept the Arab World in a unique way. Soon after people's demand spread in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Oman. Protests have also occurred in Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Western Sahara and Iranian Khuzestan. Inspired by the spirit of "Arab awakening" even Mali has felt the anger of rebellion. However, not all of the protests have turned in to success and not all of the people's demands have been addressed yet.

In fact, there are many controversies and inconsistencies that follow "Arab awakening" a trend that has attracted the World's attention. Governments in Morocco, Algeria, Oman and Jordan, for now, have tamed the revolution with promises for political and constitutional reform. Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria have all militarily confronted demonstrators. Except for Libya and Yemen, regimes in Bahrain and Syria are still in place. NATO has toppled down Gaddafi regime and at the same time Yemen did not received the Gulf Council Cooperation's (GCC) support. Syria, is about to explode and the results of the revolt will very much depend on foreign powers i.e. West versus Russia and China.

In this context Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries reaction to the spread of the peoples' demand further spark controversies. On one hand the GCC countries have launched financial stimulations to key sectors of society and engaged in limited political and economic reforms. On the other hand, they have stormed the revolts and have employing military intervention to ensure the regime's survival in Bahrain.

Main argument about the intervention was that protests were seen not as a democratic demand, but as a political and religious Shia attempts to overthrow Sunni Monarchy. The potential shift in power, as it was seen in GCC countries' eyes, (especially Saudi eyes) could have threatened not just Bahrain but also the region since the net benefit will end up in Iran's hands. What is also more interesting is that the West remained pretty calm about the intervention that opposed democratic protests (Bronner and Sackman, March 14, 2011). Thus, it seems that Eva Bellin correctly has labeled the "Arab Spring" as a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the uprisings and dictators removals (Bellin, 2012: 127-149). In relations to GCC we would say that Arab Spring represents dynamic compound of interactions and contingencies that one needs to consider before drawing any conclusion. This compound holds potential to produce processes that could be specific to the individual GCC country and different separate processes specific to the region itself.

Therefore before we project any predictions about the future of the GCC region's stability in the light of the Arab Spring we should answer several questions. First whether GCC countries' reaction (predominantly that of Sunni led monarchies Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar) to the domestic revolts, especially intervention in Bahrain was reasonable and appropriate i.e. to prevent threat from Shia led Iran's influence or Iran and Sunni-Shia rift was just the rhetoric that usually protects the regimes survival. If the response was appropriate then the question is whether financial inducements to key sectors of society and limited political and economic reforms launched to chill the protests in the GCC countries are enough to prevent further destabilization? If the responses were not appropriate what are necessary steps that GCC authorities need to consider for future regions' stability? We will address these questions accordingly.

## **2. Arab Spring: Iran's Tool to Threaten GCC Countries' Stability?**

Strong arguments about the complexity of the Arab spring's influence to GCC come from GCC reaction to the Arab protests and also from the Western countries' position on this reaction. Organized on the premises to protect Monarchies' regimes through security and economic mechanisms, this initiative was largely supported by the US interest since its inception (Legrenzi, 2011: 2-9). From the beginning common partnership was envisioned to ensure foreign policy, defense, security planning, and economic cooperation. Economic efforts were supposed to exclude negative influence from unstable neighboring countries such as Yemen (Gulf Cooperation Council). On the other hand security cooperation was supposed to mitigate potential threats from the Iraq – Iran issue and also to exclude any regional power dominance (Cronin and Masalha, 2011: 17).

The GCC states have been particularly concerned about Iran's capabilities, behavior and intentions for a long time. These concerns however have been largely based, in broader terms on the "Sunni-Shia rift issue" and "Saudi vs. Iran issue" in the narrow context. The former security dilemma has significantly grown after the US intervention in Iraq and in the light of the Arab Spring. In fact the main argument for robust and swift suffocation of the Bahrain revolts against the protestors' demands was that military reaction was an act to protect against the threat to stability from the Shia led Iran's, regional dominance. The significance of the GCC reaction to the spread of the Arab Spring on the regional countries territory drew quite the opposite GCC reaction, i.e. support that GCC countries gave to the Arab Spring outside of the region. Additionally U.S. concerns about potential Iran power projection to the region have also significantly grown in the light of the Arab Spring and Iran's nuclear power program.

Thus to fully understand whether GCC reaction to Arab Spring events (both domestically and externally) was a response resulted from the honest threat posed by Iran or just a narrative to suffocate protests we will address several issues. First, the influence of the Sunni-Shia rift to the Gulf

region, second, Iran's role in the region and the influence of demonstration and third the U.S. motivation to abstain from anti-regime supports like in the rest of the Arab World especially Libya and now in Syria.

### **2.1. Sunni-Shia rift and its influence to the GCC region in the light of Arab Spring**

Much has been written about the Sunni-Shia conflict. Even though authors disagree on the essence of the conflict most of them agree that Shia have almost always been oppressed. Some argue that the conflict is a long-lasting, bottom-up-type struggle of identities that has resurfaced at all levels of politics and society due to the recent events (Harling and Yasin, 2006). Others claim that the conflict is actively promoted top-down, by the Sunni governments during the modern era of the Middle East (Luomi, 2008: 15).

According to the first group of authors the very conflict dates back to the beginning of the religion. It was started as politically motivated and only later became a question of faith (Halm, 1997). In this struggle Shias have almost always been the oppressed and on the periphery of power in the Middle East conflict. The roots of the conflict are millennia-long. However, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, GCC (led by Saudi Arabia), Syria and to a lesser extent, Jordan and Egypt have recently entered into a Sunni-Shia rift.

Vali Nasr, a prominent author who represents the view that the rift is a result of the recent history, argues that "conflict has been shaped in the modern era according to the rule that being Sunni or Shia defined *"who has and who has not, who sits at the table and who does not"*. Nasr further claims that *"Arab nationalism displays an inherent bias against the Shia and that the 'sectarian card' is usually played by the Sunnis, not the Shias. The Shia have always "wanted to belong", but they have nearly always been excluded from power"* (Vali, 20 November 2006).

Since experts generally agree that the conflict is present and influential in the terms of our interest, it is important to understand whether and to what level the conflict between Sunni and Shia represents a threat to GCC countries. A narrow view to the issue will confirm that GCC (especially Saudi Arabia) anxiety to Iran's influence derives from potential Shia's claims of supranational identity that will tie Iran as a regional Shia leader. With this regards although Bahraini opposition parties have denied any Iranian role in the uprising Iran has historically claimed Bahrain as a province (Rubin, March 27, 2012; Blomfield, September 6, 2011). Therefore Bahrain has been described as a geopolitical battlefield where the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran converge (Friedman, March 8, 2011). Thus the question of a Sunni-Shia rift and its influence to the GCC region in the light of Arab Spring, translates in to the question of opposing to (Sunni led GCC Monarchies) or benefiting from (Iran) Shias' supranational identity.

Views about the Shias' supranational identity in the context of Arab Spring differ. On one side there those who believe that the Shia supranational identity is not a threat to the Sunni ruling countries. On the other hand there those who believe that Arab Spring has spurred this phenomenon and that Iran is trying to use this opportunity and expand its influence.

The supporters of the view that Shia's supranational identity is very unlikely to serve as a basis for political alliances argue that it is neither realistic nor viable to construct policies on such scenarios. These views' arguments derive from the Shia's strives for democracy and Shia's belonging perceptions.

According to the views that oppose Shia-Crescent type visions Shia identity does not usually mean alliance with, or loyalty to, Iran. Practice shows that after the Iranian revolution local GCC Shia's remained loyal to the States (Takeyh, June 5, 2006). They had only asked for more integration and human rights. Since early 1990s, local Shia leaders stressed that the gravity of cultural authenticity, an identity rooted in Arab culture and history (Al-Rasheed, 1998: 121-130). They demand recognition of the cultural diversity and ability to write their own history. According to Al Rasheed Madawi, recent demands of the Saudi Shia minorities are based on alternative historical narrative which anchors them in to the Saudi history. Arguably they still recall promises made by the founder of the kingdom King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in 1913 about Shia safety and freedom of worship

when their representatives swore allegiance to his government (Al-Qudaihi, Mrach 24, 2009). International Crisis Group also believes that Shia minority in Saudi Arabia realize that their survival depends on the Monarchy's regime and therefore they have emphasized national unity (International Crisis Group, September, 2005: 5). This claims however rises another interesting point with regards to Shia's belonging perceptions i.e. supranational identity in the Gulf region and Iran's influence.

Although there are mixed conclusions about Shia's claims for supranational identity it seems that the question on how a Shia population relates to the Gulf region's Sunni population and rulers differ from country to country. Analyzing pre Arab Spring grievances in the Gulf, Maximilian Terhalle, concludes that Shia demands have always been connected to the domestic context (Terhalle, 2007: 69-83). This in return negates the idea that Shia demands are toward acceptance of Iranian influence. In Bahrain for example Shia belief resides on the conservative (akhbariyya) strands that pursue a doctrine distinctly different from that of Iran (Cole, 2002: 59). Both Shia and Sunni dissidents in Yemen have similar complaints about the government-cooperation with the American government and an alleged failure to following Sharia law (Ulph, 2005: 2-8). Even the more Yemeni Shia minority is mostly Zaidis and has poor links with Iran's Shia.

Opposite views (i.e. that Arab Spring in the context of Sunni-Shia rift in the Gulf is catalyst for Shia supranational identity and Iran's dominance) concentrate on the challenges that this trend poses to the Saudi Monarchy's political and religious legitimacy (Bligh, 1985: 37-50). Shia's minority demands according to these views are claims for supranational identity that ties to Iran. As we have mentioned above, recent intervention in Bahrain and endorsement by the GCC states of the Saudi proposal to move from cooperation toward "single entity" seems to confirm these ideas (McDowell, December 20, 2011).

Saudis, but also other GCC countries are aware of Iranian influence to the Sunni-Shia rift issue with the "Arab Street" approach and abilities to bypass Arab ruling regimes. Since the Islamic republic inception Aytolla has been calling for Sunni-Shia unity, who has arguably been followed by Iran's president as well. However the biggest problems with the Iranian populist "Arab Street" approach is the narrative that directly threatens Sunni Monarchies. Attracting populace Ahmadinejad has been actively involved in direct communication with populace to exploit issues like; mistreatment of the Palestinians, US presence in the Gulf, and labeling Monarchies as corrupt and puppets to US. However Arab Spring events have arguably directly threatened GCC monarchies for two reasons.

First, protestors' package of demands among others, contain the sequel of religious demands that could weaken the Saudi Monarch's power. Since Iran has never withdrawn from claims over the Bahrain's territory, once that Saudi Kingdom is weak the rest of the GCC kingdoms could not match Iran's power. Second, Iran like the West, supports democratic reforms but GCC countries see this only as a decoy to the West, especially the US, or as a logical role that Iran could play for now (we will refer to this latter).

Closer examination of the Saudi political system could explain why and how the Arab Spring in GCC is a political threat to the Saudi kingdom and with that to other GCC Sunni monarchies. Political, family and religious mixture between al-Saud family and that of al-Wahhab religious leadership (Nyrop, 2008: 50); along with the active political role of the ulama-the body of Islamic religious leaders and jurists (Goldstein, 2010: 118); and Sharia law based judicial system enforce the political and religious legitimacy of the royal family (Hefner, 2011: 58). Thus social demands by the religiously diverged minority (i.e. Gulf Shia minority) are interpreted as a challenge, not just to a state but also to Islam itself. Hence this unique accumulation of power complicates any venture for change in the GCC countries due to the Sunni-Shia rift and fear from Iran.

Iran has always used its ideological and political influence over Shia dissidents in the Gulf to compete with its Sunni neighbors. For instance, in Bahrain, Iran continues to have influence over the radical Shia group Al-Haq. The same is true for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where Iran uses its position as leaders of the Shia to gain influence amongst the minority Shia communities, especially in times of greater sectarian tension. Iran's populist methodology has been also employed in Yemen. Iran has used Shi'ism as an excuse to rhetorically support the Houthis rebellion and to compete with Saudi

Arabia for political influence. GCC officials have accused Iran of interfering in the affairs of Bahrain as well.

The importance of the Sunni-Shia rift in shaping GCC countries' reaction to Arab Spring domestically probably could be best explained by the mutual accusations with Iran. The Chief of Staff of Iran's armed forces, General Firouzabadi, stated that "the Arab dictatorial regimes in the Persian Gulf are unable to contain the popular uprisings...the Persian Gulf has always, is and shall always belong to Iran." (Ghasemilee, April 30, 2011). The GCC Secretary General responded by describing these remarks as, "unacceptable blatant interference in the internal affairs of GCC countries, expressing complete ignorance on the region's history, its Arab identity, and the nature of (its) political regimes." (AFP, May 2, 2011).

From all of the above it is clear that the GCC countries reaction to the Arab Spring is largely shaped by the Monarchies' perception to the demonstrations as a threat to the Kingdoms. Although there many examples that Shia demands differ from country to country and are domestically focused (thus departing from Shia supranational identity) Iran's interplay on the Sunni-Shia rift issue empowered Monarchies to protect regimes labeling the demonstrations as a challenge to the political and religious legitimacy. However, fair view will note that this perception is only relevant for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait. Oman and Qatar do not follow this logic. The question than is whether they follow the GCC unity for the survival of their Royalty, whether they fear from Iran or they follow GCC unity for both reasons.

## **2.2. The GCC countries fear from Iran's power projection and its influence to demonstrations inspired by the Arab Spring**

Iran plans for power projection and its behavior in the Gulf and broader in the Middle East, largely shape the GCC countries' fear from Iran and reaction to the Arab Spring events. This could be understandable if one agrees on the 2010 conclusion of the US Intelligence Community Annual Threat Assessment prepared for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. According to the report Iran's current strategy has four main priorities: preserving the Islamic regime, safeguarding Iran's sovereignty, defending its nuclear ambitions, and expanding its influence in the region and the Islamic world (Blair, February 2, 2010).

The Arab Monarchies' fear from Iran's influence in the Gulf has sufficiently grown after the Islamic revolution. In fact establishment of the GCC chiefly came as a respond of the fear from Iran. According to Vali Nasr "*...the Iranian Islamic revolution changed the Shia-Sunni power equation in Muslim countries "from Lebanon to India" arousing the traditionally subservient Shia to the alarm of traditionally dominant and very non-revolutionary Sunni...*" (Vali, 2006:143-150). The removal of the Taliban and Saddam Husein regimes has further energized Iran's position in the Gulf. These interventions, especially the later one, have in the GCC countries' eyes enabled Iran strength. Furthermore Iran's nuclear program sparks many controversies that push GCC countries toward unity.

Although the GCC states have established good economic relations with Iran, its nuclear program and control over Iraq have evoked dark scenarios among GCC countries. As Mustafa Alani holds the GCC states see Iran as an aggressive and expansionist state and are convinced that a nuclear capacity-equipped Iran would constitute a major challenge to them (Alani, February 27, 2007). However it could be argued that individual GCC countries relations to Iran do not follow GCC-Iran patterns.

This is to some extent true. Oman, has consistently maintained friendly relations with Tehran, even during the tense days of the revolution and the Islamic Republic's war with Iraq (O'Reilly, 1998: 75). Qatari-Iranian relations have been similarly warm and cordial (Bahgat, 2008: 318). Saudis have also met Iran's officials on several occasions. King Abdullah and President Ahmadinejad met in March 2007 to discuss the situation in Lebanon but have also expressed alarm at the sectarian violence in Iraq, worrying that it could fuel similar tensions throughout the Middle East (Fattah, March 4, 2007). The Saudi King has also invited President Ahmadinejad to attend the *hajj* in Mecca, in December 2007 (Derakhshi and Dahl, December 12, 2007). Another important event was



when President Ahmadinejad was invited to the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in December 2007 (Zainab, December 4, 2007). Nevertheless beside frequent visits and ceremonial neighboring relations there is nothing in the individual GCC's countries-Iran relationships that suggests relief for Sunni led Monarchies' unrest regarding the fear from Iran and potential abuse of Shia populations on its own territories.

Ranges of ideas for solving the security dilemma in the Gulf region, that include Iran as a partner to GCC have failed. According to Kaveh Afrasiabi such initiatives include membership of OPEC and of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Arab-Israeli conflict and combating terrorism (Afrasiabi, December 6, 2006). Nonetheless, as Nicole Stracke, carefully observes the GCC threat perceptions have evolved out of the regional conflict with Iran or the current situation in Iraq." (Stracke, 2007). Numbers of activities and events seem to follow this logic.

In response to Iran's nuclear program the GCC has been calling for a Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone in the Gulf region (Stracke, 2007) Announcement to conduct research on a collective peaceful nuclear program could also be seen as a step that indicates the GCC states' determination to balance Iran's regional power or Iranian behavior relating to it. Although Ahmadinejad, was the first Iranian president to attend a GCC summit in 2007, attempts to allay fears of his Gulf neighbors with the program to promote relations between Tehran and the GCC remained calm by the six member states. This may seem reasonable since the GCC countries trust of Iran's honesty have been largely reduced after Iran has created long range missile programs that can only be effective if armed with weapons of mass destruction. Iranian claims to Bahrain and territorial dispute with the UAE are yet another example that ignites disputes between the GCC and the Republic. Iran's religious and political legitimacy challenges to GCC countries however is the biggest threat that shapes their reaction to Arab Spring along with the Sunni-Shia rift and the Western reaction.

Religion plays great role in the Islamic Republic foreign policy. What Saudi Arabia represent for the Sunni world Iran is for the Shia world (The US Library of Congress, 2004: 232). Iran sees its revolution as the only legitimate expression of the universality of Islam with its Supreme Leader as the natural leader and protector of the faith. According to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, democratic Arab uprisings emanate from a logic rooted in the 1979 Iranian revolution. Thus interpretation of the Arab Spring as the "Islamic Awakening" is a careful narrative that meets Arab streets grievance but also the purpose to discredit Monarchies. This leads us to the second serious challenge to the GCC from the Republic in the wake of Arab Spring.

Since the Islamic Revolution, the ruling philosophy of the Republic has been anti-monarchy, populist, quasi-democratic, and draws its ruling authority from the role of the Supreme Leader and the Shi'ite clerical elite. Iran's political challenge to the GCC monarchies regarding the Arab Spring protests builds on religious interplay for unity among Sunni – Shia against corrupt monarchies. This challenge is compound of the by-passing method of the Arab Street approach (discussed above), where labeling the Monarchies as antidemocratic and corrupt directly inhibit GCC countries authority legitimacy.

Although Iran's behavior (military power and nuclear program) and ambition to dominate the region represent threat to GCC's Countries there is no direct evidence that Iran has actively stimulated peoples' demands in the Gulf countries. Thus the GCC reaction to the Arab Spring demands, domestically regarding the fear from Iran's influence, resonate the logic that protects Monarchies. Support to the Arab Spring's democratic demands abroad also follows the logic of protecting Monarchies from Iran since these efforts will erode Iran's partner i.e. Syria but also pleased West (mainly U.S.) attitude. Even though the U.S. has supported the Arab Spring not just rhetorically but militarily (Libya) and politically (Syria) the U.S. has halted its support of the peoples demand during the GCC countries aggressive domestic response. To fully understand the U.S. position and thus close the picture about the GCC countries domestic response to Arab Spring we will address the reasons behind the U.S. reaction to the Arab Spring in the GCC countries.

### **2.3. Understanding the U.S. reaction to the GCC countries' domestic response to the Arab Spring**

The U.S. behavior during GCC domestic reaction to the Arab Spring is largely shaped by the U.S. interest in the region. The Gulf is a primary strategic economic, political, and military interest to the US. However Iran's revolution in 1979 and the 9/11 attacks in 2001 have played a crucial role in shaping U.S. reaction toward the Arab Spring events in the GCC.

The Revolution in Iran has removed the Shah and has installed adversary policy toward U.S. This ended the era of U.S. balancing foreign policy between two main players in the Gulf Iran and Saudi Arabia. Since then U.S. policy in the region is designed to counter Iran's dominance and to back Gulf States toward this direction.

The 9/11 attacks and the U.S. reaction in the aftermath have made another significant impact that influence U.S. efforts in the Gulf. Although Saddam was lost as partner after the First Gulf War toppling his regime in 2003 has arguably created unintended effect. Failure to predict that Iraq's Shia dominant populace will not accept the U.S. and its coalition as liberators the 2003 Iraq intervention has not just shifted the balance in the Gulf and empowered Iran, but has also stimulated the Sunni – Shia rift. The toppling of Saddam's regime has produced two factors that further influenced U.S. behavior to the GCC countries. First, fear from Iran's power in the region has sufficiently grown among the Saudi and the rest of the GCC Monarchies who interpreted this as direct threat to their existence. Second Iran's behavior, designed to isolate the U.S. influence in the region has emphasized new dimension. Iran has increased calls for democracy by implementing populist methods on the Arab Streets through speeches that undermine Monarchies' regimes labeling them as U.S. corrupt puppets.

Today the U.S. has three main priorities in working with GCC countries while competing with Iran: first, to secure the stability of energy exports and trade through the Strait of Hormuz; second, to protect its allies; and third, to deal with the broader threat of extremism and terrorism in the region (Alsis et al, 2011 :7). All of these priorities contradict the idea of Arab awakening and regime change in the GCC countries.

According to Chomsky there is no significant change in the U.S. traditional approach to the Middle East (Hicham, March 15, 2011). He argues that the idea launched in time of President Eisenhower "control the Middle East energy resources-control the world" is very much relevant today. Chomsky's argument about the U.S. "ruthless desire to control the oil, protect its strategic interests and ensure the free flow of capital" is in fact a breeding ground for Iran's officials' rhetoric while by-passing Arab regimes on the streets. Chomsky's logic was in fact confirmed by the Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell's statement about U.S. relations with allies in the Middle East region. Addressing the then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' visit to Bahrain just two days before Saudi and the UAE forces entered Bahrain to help the regime survival he stated that "The message to the friend and allies is 'All of the...deep strategic interests we have with them remain the same as they were six months ago'." (Parrish, March 12, 2011). However, the US official addressing the Bahrain visit also makes it clear that "one of those interests is stability", and not democratic changes.

The Arab Spring has dramatically shaken the Middle East stability. The prism of Israel's security and survival, (the US allies) have been largely endangered with the Mubarak forced resignation. Both the US and Israel's main fear is the possibility of a new regime, of any origin(the army, a newly elected president or the Muslim Brotherhood), abrogating the Peace Treaty (Yaron , January 28, 2011). This fear is growing significantly after Iran's serious attempts to renew its relationship with Egypt (Shatz, 2012: 15-17). Thus although the U.S. and the rest of the West supported the Arab Spring in Africa, the US response to the decisive victory of Hamas in the Palestinian 2006 election and support for GCC Countries' domestic reaction to the Arab Spring express that the U.S. is not ready to trade stability with democracy in the Middle East.

This logic also goes against U.S. counterterrorist policy designed to spread democracy and deny accusations that the U.S. support corrupted regimes in the Muslim world. The US did not oppose Ben Ali's or Mubarak's removal and have even militarily, through NATO, led an operation that

supported Gadafi removal. Instead it appears that in the GCC region the U.S. decided to anchor to Sunni Monarchies and thus pursuit counterterrorist efforts with the regimes' support (Alsis et al., 2011: 18-20). In return Sunni GCC countries received strategic partner to counter Iran's fear and dominance, but have also backed efforts for democratic changes elsewhere (like in Libya, Syria or Yemen) and the promised to implement reform domestically.

From all of the above it is clear that the Arab Spring complexity has reached its peak in the Gulf where the Sunni-Shia rift, Iran's regional ambition and U.S. interests clashes. The analyses of the issues that shape Gulf complexity and reflect the GCC countries' reaction to the Arab Spring show several important conclusions. First although peoples' demands in GCC countries follow the Arab Spring logic for democratic change GCC Monarchies have overemphasised the Sunni-Shia rift challenge to the religious and political challenges to the Monarchies. Second there is no direct evidence that Iran has purposely stimulated the demonstrations in the GCC countries. Third Iran's regional ambition, nuclear programme and populist democratic policy on the Arab streets that echoed the populace logic and undermine the U.S. and the Monarchies' regimes have anchored U.S. support to the GCC monarchies.

The U.S. decision to choose stability over democratic reforms has for now prevented the Arab Spring from toppling GCC regimes. As a result this decision has helped Sunni GCC Monarchies to preserve the regimes and for now to counter Iran's influence and attempts for supranational Shia identity to dominate the Gulf. However since the Arab Spring holds potential that goes beyond the Sunni-Shia rift the next question that needs to be addressed is whether measures undertaken from the Sunni GCC monarchies are reasonable to withhold further demonstrations and prevent Iran to dominate the region.

### **3. GCC and the Future of the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring has urged the GCC countries to seriously reconsider their domestic politics. Although reluctant to changes, GCC monarchies have realised that they need to do something that will accommodate their peoples' demands but also its ally the U.S. Spread between the demands for change and necessity to preserve the regime arguably GCC countries have undertaken measures that reflects the anxiety rather than concrete measures that will produce long term stability.

Acting similarly in historical patterns of authoritarian regimes, the GCC reactions domestically, have employed a combination of measures for national security, spreading fear and intimidation, and promising economic progress (Kamrava, 2011: 356). Neglecting political and social dimensions of the demands GCC regimes have sought to strengthen their rule by pumping massive amounts of money into the economy. Nonetheless, instead of resolving the problem undertaken the measures look like GCC countries are buying social stability in the short term.

Short term solutions in the light of Iran's regional ambition and its quasi-democratic calls for change on the Arab Streets do not promise a bright future for GCC countries. Furthermore the U.S. anger about the human rights abuses should not be further tested for two reasons. First, if the U.S. is about to ensure its strategic interests in the Middle East, beside GCC officials, it needs to gain trust among the populace as well. To accomplish this leverage the U.S. will have to divorce itself from policy that is always in favours of regimes. Second, consequently the U.S. will lose initiative in the current War with Al Qaeda and its associated movements (AQAM) which is in fact very much of a problem to the GCC countries itself.

#### **3.1. GCC monarchies immediate response: step closer on the losing side's doorway**

Broadcasting a massive program of state investments in order to tame pro-democratic reforms has replaced measures for gradual changes in the GCC countries. Almost all GCC countries feared the Arab Spring. However none of them have undertook specific reforms yet. Precisely there is nothing that will address demands for equitable distribution of wealth, social justice, transparency and willingness for participation or demands for equal access to the World's opportunities. Additionally almost all GCC countries acted with brutality claiming the duty to protect the system and order.



The UAE authorities among other have limited civil society organizations ability of performance since the beginning of the protests and it seems that these measures are still in place (Murphy, April 2, 2012). Instead there few detentions that riled the unrest to the regime instead calming it down (Tran, April 11, 2011: 16). Furthermore allegations of hiring foreign a mercenary army to ensure regime hold on power, drive the UAE in the opposite direction (Mazzeti and Hager, May 14, 2011). As Merhan Kamrwa claims in Qatar, where anti-state sentiments are conspicuous in their absence, there have not been any discernible changes in the domestic political environment (Kamrawa, 2012: 97). The government of Saudi Arabia also played its role. Saudi officials, among other measures for example, have moved swiftly to extinguish a then budding protest movement of women claiming the right to drive, a campaign inspired by the uprisings across the Arab world demanding new freedoms (Mac Farquhar, May 23, 2011). Bahrain officials' brutality to Shia majority has been uncompromising too (Kristof, March 16, 2011). Thus instead of chilling out the Sunni – Shia rift the GCC domestic reaction have stimulated it and gained short term benefits. Furthermore in a long term this politic is on the losing side for several reasons.

Naser sees Shias as objective and a subjective democratic force. Almost always Shia clerics have been vocal for a democratic political system. This is especially important for Bahrain where they are a majority (Vali, 2006:180). However Shia's struggle for a democratic government is also placed in the perception of implementing Islam. Yitzak Nakash explains that "[u]nlike Sunnis, who in theory are expected to obey their rulers and even tolerate a tyrant in order to avoid civil strife and preserve the cohesion of the Muslim community, observant Shi'is recognize no authority on earth except that of the imam (Nakash, 2006). If there is no Imam than for Shias there is no human sovereign who is fully legitimate. Arguments (discussed above) that Shia demands have generally always been domestically oriented are crucial for Gulfs Monarchies. This means that although they are not satisfied with the current regimes their demands for changes are against assimilation and for integration (they demand recognition of the cultural diversity and ability to write its own history) not for secession. Having in mind Naser's and Naksh's claims about the Shias' perspectives and culture, repressive response to these demands will just empower, not isolate, Iran. Instead of keeping them aside GCC Countries should place these demands as the center of gravity first and then focus on Iran. This is important to understand if the GCC countries are about to isolate Iran who in turn will grow stronger by attracting Arab Streets with the stories about Muslim unity and Corrupt Monarchies regimes to the socially frustrated Sunni and Shia populace in the GCC region.

The Arab Spring in the Gulf is also comprised of economic deprivation and struggle for equal opportunity. Although the Shia population is isolated from these rights the Sunni population is as well. Current demographic dynamics in the Region among other is a significant contributor for such results. According to Tara Karthathe Persian Gulf region has one of the highest population growth rates in the world. During the conference of the Union of Arab Banks (UAB) the chairman of the UAB Adnan Yousuf stated that many regional countries are also suffering from a drop in per capita income due to a population growth and GDP fall, adding that this has also led to a sharp rise in joblessness to more than 50 per cent in some member countries. Following the economic logic this is understandable since the overwhelming numbers of youth cannot be absorbed by the regions' employment opportunities. An additional issue is that globalization and technological advance have created standards that require quality gained with less quantity (i.e. skillful people that could answer several profile requirements). Most of the youth need to gain access to training and jobs but the region cannot provide it in the sufficient manner (Bhanugopan, 2007: 365-381).

Beside the absence of programs that will reduce the number of the people with a lack of skills, there is another more complicated issue connected with the strife for equal opportunity. Even though highly criticized through Shia demands the issue of equal opportunity is something that disturbs Sunni youths too. Most positions of authority within GCC countries are dominated by specific royal families who are in fact promoters of such laws (Al-Ali et al, 2008). This issue is crucial since it represents potential to unite demands for democratic change between Sunni and Shia against the Monarchies regimes.

The impact of globalization has additionally affected GCC counties' people's social frustration. Although local governments have undertaken measures to reassure privilege for domestic labor it is very hard for GCC governments to persuade the private sector to follow this logic (Budhwar et al 2002: 198-215). Therefore many of the GCC people see stability in the public sector where places and opportunity are limited (Randeree, 2012). Additionally private owners are not bound by citizenship or patriotism but with profit. Foreign labor coming from India, China and elsewhere is lowering the working salaries and, create even more grievances among the populace.

Frustrated, unemployed and anger, the youth in the GCC also bear the burden of modernity. Social pressure dictated from the double edged sword of globalization (poverty vs. wealth, asymmetric distribution of wealth etc.) along with waves of modernism pose certain difficulties for young GCC populace in adjusting to tradition. On one side thanks to internet and electronic media they have ability to see global wealth. On the other side they have to suffer tradition and poverty. Many females in the GCC do not share their male friends' views about their role in the family, education and society (Al Munajjed & Sabbagh, 2010: 43). Indeed they have different views about equal opportunity (International Labor Organization –ILO, 2010). Hence without appropriate response the GCC's countries risk further polarizing of the situation and stimulating greater demonstrations.

It is hard to believe that rhetoric build under the Sunni – Shia rift, Shia supranational identity and Iran's regional hegemonic aspiration provide cover for Monarchies future existence. Complains like those of Bahrain's Shia majority about receiving poor treatment in employment, housing and infrastructure (Financial Times, February 17, 2011) or issues that press Sunni youth could no longer be undermined with claims such as political and religious challenges to the legitimacy (Admon, April 12, 2012). This is especially important in the light of U.S. support and much lauder distinction of GCC governments' efforts to deal with the people's demands (Allen, April 9, 2012). At the same time it is very unlikely that the GCC monarchies will overnight decide to transform in to parliamentary democracies or any type of democracies.

### **3.2. Why democracy will sink in the Gulf' sand in the near future?**

Several reasons produce the argument that "The Arab Spring" in the GCC countries will not result in democratic transformation in the near future. Monarchies will do anything to preserve their power and existence. Defending religious and political legitimacy they will employ the Sunni-Shia rift call for national unity and continue to pay off most of the potential opponents and the West inclination. Although there are significant democratic forces among the young Sunnis and Shias populace form the GCC countries their perception about democracy differ from Western liberal democracies (Al Munajjed, and Sabbagh 2010). Being quite long in the region the U.S. have recognized that democratization in the GCC countries will by definition cause an earthquake to stability which in turn will challenge their strategic interests. Furthermore democratization in the GCC countries is slippery road since it might opened the door for the democratically elected governments whose views and interests will change the business climate against the U.S. interests.

The heavily discussed issue with Iran's ambitions is the starting point in the Monarchies regimes defense. Mergence of religion and state thus creates legitimacy for minorities' suppression (since it is seen as the dissident factor) and for supporting the vague reality where minority rules the majority. Calls for "national unity" are usual narrative against the Shia supranational identity and its sponsor Iran. Concentration of the wealth is yet another problem that accumulates democratic forces ability in the GCC countries.

Oil rich monarchies are able to paralyze civil forces for two reasons. They create "rentier economies" and as a consequence there is no need for taxation. Possessing most of the oil sources royal families influence social interaction and decision-making in all fields of politics through the highly elaborate networks of patrons and clients, rent-seeking, informal group structures and neopatrimonialism (Schlumberger, 2000: 250-51). "Wasta" (the process of mediation) the social mechanism that determines political decisions in society, economy and politics therefore is the

“lubricant of the patronage system” (Sharabi, 1988: 45). This “social norm” instead of, labor’s personal capacity or value, determines material benefits and one’s non-material enhancements (jobs, positions, licenses, access to information etc.) in the society (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993: 30). Therefore the personal contact to political decision makers determines and facilitates how resources are allocated and thus how the material well-being of the individual, the family, the clan etc. is secured (Luciani, 1990: 65-84 and 85-98. “Rentier based economies” contribute to a lack of taxation. In turns this inhibits civil societies’ energy for demands, a credential force for democratization (Weiffen, 2004).

The U.S. actions in the GCC’ region are designed to accommodate their strategic interest to these dynamics. Therefore they support the royal families’ interest with development or military assistance programs as reward to the “strategic rent” (Beblawi, 1990: 98). However, being quite long in the region the U.S. has also recognized how challenging democratization could be to their strategic interests. They have recognized that Monarchies calls for unity against Shia threats and socio-economic relations produce formation of political parties on ethnic and religious division, rather than over policy differences. Accompanied by the cultural embedded Arab determinism democratic voting among the Arab populace is interpreted as an assertion of one’s identity rather than a real choice. On the other hand the U.S. is aware that although GCC regimes support the U.S. the populace’s support is very low. Hence there is reasonable fear that democratic changes will directly endanger U.S. strategic interests. Nonetheless if the Arab Spring transformation in to democratization of the GCC countries is unlikely, the question is what needs to be done in order to appropriately address peoples’ demands and prevent the foreseeable earthquake.

### **3.3. Building the platform for the future: social engineering as a key to prevail the upcoming earthquake in the GCC region**

GCC countries for now have successfully resolved domestic turbulences from the Arab Spring. Thus together with the U.S. they have prevented Iran’s domination and damage to the strategic partnership. However the Arab Spring and grievance that still steams from the GCC populace, are making clear that the old ways of buying the silence of the opposition through patronage and corruption will not work forever. (Colombo, 2012:16).

Without a clear platform for social stability the future of the GCC countries stability is not so bright. In fact the GCC countries should immediately reconsider the necessity of the new social contract. The architecture of this contract should address immediate change in education and skills building among the GCC countries’ and government role in stimulating corporate social responsibility. In turns this should enhance domestic growth and investments, reconstruct the patterns of existing social norms of participation and relax the perceptions about the women’s role in the society. Furthermore if the U.S. is about to save its strategic interest it should invest in the support of the changes toward a new social contract among the GCC government and its people.

Although most of the GCC countries (especially Saudi Arabia) have tried to pay off social stability with large investments, on a long term, these efforts could increase social frustration. According to Ibrahim Saif, and Rand Fakhoury investments like this could increase inflationary rates which will further stimulate people’s unrest since economic deprivation will grow deeper (Saif & Fakhoury, February 16, 2012). Instead on a short term policy oriented measures GCC countries should focus on a real economic measure, creating more jobs and stimulating private sector development.

High cost of living and unemployment are the greatest concerns among GCC countries’ youth (Al Munajjed, and Sabbagh, 2010: 3). Without programs that will stimulate private sector and alternative economies outside of the energy sector the future of investing in the public sectors enlargement is unstable and not promising. To move forward however, education and skill building programs need to be entrenched on the GCC countries’ agendas. As we saw above one of the biggest issues that strikes the GCC region is domestic unskillful labor to cope with modern businesses trends. This will not change if the education remains the same. As the 2009 UNDP Arab Knowledge report

stressed the importance of knowledge-society-development triad could only be achieved with tireless effort and rigorous follow-up for change (Arab Knowledge Report, 2009). These conclusions links to the Mona Al Munajjed and Karim Sabbagh's findings about the GCC youth demands clearly pointing toward more practical skills based education instead of determinist theoretical and boring teaching that have lost contacts with modernity. Changing education toward modern trends and creating programs that will encourage educators toward implementation of these trends will create a base for future improvement.

Building on an educated and skillful youth GCC governments should stimulate a divorce from inequitable relationship-based human resource management policies such as "wasta" towards a competence or merit based approach. Instead investments to carry the burden of employment in the public sectors investments should be reallocated to support programs for encouraging greater involvement in private sector businesses. These businesses nonetheless, should not be energy sources, oriented toward diverse economies, developing the East and greater regional market integration (Saif and Fakhoury, February 16, 2012). Therefore instead for pumping the public sector, investments in regional economies could benefit not just the single government but the region itself.

The importance of educational changes, for the stable social platform that will tamed social unrest, come to light in the Arab Women's demands too. Poor female involvement in the GCC business environment is a huge problem for GCC countries as they are more and more hit by the effects of globalization. Diversified and knowledge based economies require equal female participation. Government programs that stimulate changes in the conservative perception toward female labor in the GCC are welcome to the private sectors. As Jamali and other argue stimulation of these employees could be crucial support to educational and government's efforts to nurture values of equity, fairness and mutual respect (Jamali et al 2005: 581-594).

Investing in the GCC social stability is important to the U.S. too. If the U.S. is about to maintain regional stability, prevent destabilization, counter the threat from Iran and future birth of terrorism then it should also stimulate GCC countries toward social changes and continue to discourage any further ruthless authoritarian type reaction. Efforts to support social stability programs could improve the U.S. image among the GCC populace as the determined partner not just as the ruthless energy consumer. In turns this will limit Iran's ability to manipulate "The Arab Streets" and threaten the GCC countries stability and U.S. strategic interests.

Many more authors have argued that democracy without social stability and platforms that inhibit social frustration could not alone cure the Al Qaeda modern phenomenon of radicalization (Hehir, 2008: 307-332). There are many examples of self-radicalized Muslims who are second or third generation Muslims that reside in the Western countries, who have received Western education and have grown in the democratic environment. In most cases personal social frustration and failure of the western governments (especially relevant to the European countries) to integrate these individuals, is the source of their behavior (Forst, 2010: 21-42)

All in all GCC countries immediately need to reconsider their domestic policies. The Arab Spring maybe halted, but is far from over. Although the Arab Spring has not resulted in democratic changes the GCC governments need effective social platform to address peoples' demands and prevent upcoming earthquake. The U.S. government should also reconsider its role in the Region. It should continue to discourage regimes ruthless policies and accommodate its ambition to support social stability efforts in order to secure its strategic interest regarding the oil, Iran's ambitions and potential reincarnation of the Al Qaeda and its associated movements.

### Conclusion

The Arab Spring has significantly challenged GCC countries. Interpreting peoples' demands as Shia political and religious threats to the GCC Sunni Monarchies, GCC's countries have employed brutal measures to suffocate any attempts for political changes. For now there is no clear evidences that connects Shia's demands in the GCC countries with Iran and the struggle for Shia supranational

identity. Nevertheless Iran's regional hegemonic ambition and U.S. strategic interests have largely contributed to these results.

In addition to save the existence of the Monarchies, the GCC countries have employed two additional measures. First they have supported peoples' demands in the Arab Countries that have no Monarchies. Second they have launched financial stimulations to key sectors of society in order to buy off peoples unrest. Unfortunately it is very hard to believe that these measures will suppress economic deprivation, people's demands for social justice, equality, transparency, willingness for participation and demands for equal access to the world's opportunities. At the same time US strategic interests in the Gulf and potential Iran dominance prevent any support for democratic changes in the near future. Democratic changes will probably inhibit the U.S. ability to influence future stability in its favor and Iran is very likely to benefit from this. However recent demonstrations in the Gulf clearly confirm that something needs to be done.

Therefore appropriate measures that will shape future social stability, and adjust to people's demands for social justice, equality, transparency women's rights need to be taken. GCC governments need to stimulate education, building skills among the youth to cope with the modernity and trends in globalized business environment. If the U.S. is about to preserve its strategic interests in the region it should also consider diplomatic pressure toward this direction. Finally, an appropriately designed social stability platform holds strong potential to limit grievances against GCC regimes, which in turn will benefit all stakeholders, Gulf populace, the Monarchies to continue its existence, and the U.S. to maintain its strategic interests.

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