

# The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and International Relations of the Gulf

by Lars Erslev Andersen, Senior Researcher, Danish Institute for International Studies.

Legranzi, Matteo (2011) *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris. ISBN 978-1845119218, £57.50 (hardback).

The rulers of the Arab Peninsula states did not welcome the political developments in north Africa and Egypt during the so-called “Arab Spring” in 2011. Reluctantly, they followed the demonstrations in Tunisia that led to President Ben Ali’s fall and escape to Saudi Arabia, but as everyone else, they believed it to be a unique event that would be contained to Tunisia. It was not, and a month later Egypt’s President Mubarak was overthrown and a wave of demonstrations demanding democracy, political reforms, and new leaders washed over the Arab Middle East including Yemen and Bahrain.

To the annoyance of Saudi Arabia’s king, the fall of Mubarak was endorsed by U.S. President Barack Obama, and immediately the king, together with the rulers in the other Arab Gulf states, took the initiative to build up a bulwark against the “Arab Spring.” On the one hand, they poured a lot of money into the society, and on the other hand, they banned demonstrations. In other words, they tried to pay people to stay out of the streets. At the same time, they became very active in international affairs. First, they convinced the Arab League to support a resolution in the UN Security Council that gave the green light for the military intervention in Libya. Second, they engaged in trying to calm down the crisis in Yemen by getting President Ali Abdullah Salah out of office. And third, they became active in supporting the opposition in Syria. The signal was clear: The West needs the sheikhs and kings on the peninsula to manage the turmoil evolving in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. And the message was: The prize for help from the rulers in the Arab Peninsula would be ignorance from the West on how the kings and the sheikhs handled their own backyard like the brutal crackdown on the demonstrations in Bahrain—i.e., “we help you in the West, and you close your eyes on how we handle our own problems.” Since the summer war in July 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel, the Arab Gulf states, together with Jordan, have framed threats and conflicts in the Middle East in a narrative that points to a confrontation between Shia and Sunni Islam and argued for the necessity to keep Iran out of the region and the Islamists down. This narrative has echoed well in the West.

The six Arab Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Oman) both on their own and in concert with their regional organization Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have increasingly profiled themselves as important players in handling the evolving conflicts in the Middle East. Especially after the Arab Spring, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been active in the international relations of the Middle East, and often they have followed this policy, using GCC as a tool that gave them both a kind of cover and regional strength. GCC was established in 1981 in the context of the Iran–Iraq war, but until a few years ago, it was seen as a paper tiger without real significance in international affairs. However, in the last years it has become more visible and active and has functioned as an umbrella for Qatar’s effort to break a solution in the brutal conflict in the northern part of Yemen. During the Arab uprisings, the GCC in particular turned up on the international diplomatic scene as an active player.

Thus, the study on the GCC by the Italian Middle East scholar Matteo Legranzi is a timely publication since knowledge of the GCC outside the region is very limited both among politicians and diplomats and among Middle East scholars. Of course there have been books and articles that address the history and development of the council, but a comprehensive and thematically structured study of the organization is rare in Middle East research. The author is a professor in international relations at the University of Venice. He is well known for his diligent studies of Gulf affairs and has published and edited books and articles on security policy in the Persian Gulf. For these reasons, his book on the GCC is enriching. It is a well-written and wisely structured book, which gives the reader a comprehensive overview of the history, structure, and activities of the GCC, as well as an in-depth analysis of the problems this organization is facing in order to reach the ambitious goals the rulers of the Arab Gulf states rhetorically put forward at the establishment of the GCC. The vision was to create an Arab Gulf union inspired by the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) and later the European Union (EU), but as Legranzi convincingly demonstrates, this never happened, and it will probably never happen. So what kind of organization is the GCC?

The book starts with an analysis of the context of the creation of GCC where Legranzi is very critical of the general assumption that its establishment is comparable to the creation of the federation of the seven emirates in UAE. He underlines that the emirates' formation came about through heavy involvement from external and formal forces, the UK, Iran, and others, while the formation of the GCC was exclusively a result of negotiations among the Arab Gulf states. The idea was first drafted in 1978, but one obstacle at the time was the role of Iraq. The Arab Gulf states were partly worried about the dominance of Iraq as well as reluctant to challenge Iran by allying themselves with Iran's rival. After the war between Iraq and Iran broke out in 1980, there were good reasons for not inviting Iraq into the club. At the same time, the Arab Gulf states needed a bulwark against Iran and against the threat of exporting the Islamic Revolution to the peninsula that Iran posed after the revolution in 1979. Legranzi points out the interesting fact that while the dynamics behind the creation of the GCC were defense and security matters, these are almost absent in the institutional structure of the organization, which today is more focused on economic and cultural cooperation.

After the historical account and analysis of the formal structure of the GCC, Legranzi proceeds to analyze the organization thematically: the economy, defense, diplomacy, and problems with Iran's nuclear program, ending with an analysis of the GCC's relations with NATO. He also discusses the GCC in light of international relations theory, drawing on the debates of the Persian Gulf as a regional security complex. He closes by arguing for the need of a theoretical bricolage, combining the more constructivist aspects of regional security theory with classical realism and balance of power theory. This theoretical discussion is central in most scholarly studies of the Persian Gulf, and Legranzi seems to place himself in an Aristotelic middle way between classical realism and constructivists' love for politics of identity.

The overall conclusion of the book is that the GCC never developed an institutional framework that brings it even close to being a strong regional player, not to mention a union. Especially in defense matters, GCC member states have been extremely reluctant to develop institutional units. In that respect, the GCC mirrors the states themselves. Even if they are using considerable amounts on defense and weapon systems, they are afraid that strong armies would pose a regime threat. Therefore, they want neither strong armed forces nor something like a strong GCC army. Only in internal security matters, to counter different kinds of opposition, have they succeeded in cooperating. The decision-making process in the Arab Gulf states is limited to the ruler and his closest family, and this setup is mirrored in the GCC, which is, as the first general secretary of GCC labeled it, a club for gentlemen (the rulers) following "rules of Shaikhly exchange" as formulated by the gulf scholar Tim Niblock.

Matteo Legranzi has written a very timely book that explores an organization which increasingly seems to play a significant role in international relations of the Persian Gulf. It

fills a gap in the research of the Middle East and is very useful both for scholars and students of the Middle East.