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## The Gulf Crisis: A Case for Rethinking the Gulf Region Security Paradigm

Dr. Emma Soubrier

### Introduction

Looking at the Gulf's security challenges over the last decade, one would certainly be quick to point to the Arab Spring and the associated events that unraveled in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since early 2011 as the most important inflection point. Indeed, from the perspective of the countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),<sup>1</sup> these events have caused them to recognize additional risk factors, mainly regarding the political and military dimensions of their security. However, other dimensions of security—namely economic, societal, and environmental—have also become increasingly important. Recently, the 2017 Gulf crisis, while finding its roots in concerns linked to the political dimension of security, has seriously impacted the economic and social fabric of the GCC. This demonstrates the importance of moving away from analytical frameworks that have traditionally overemphasized the political and military aspects of Gulf security and adopting a more comprehensive approach that encapsulates risk factors in their plurality and diversity. Through an overview of the variety of security sectors that have been impacted by evolving regional dynamics and systemic factors in the GCC over the last decade (particularly since the beginning of the Gulf crisis), this chapter intends to deconstruct the idea that individual political and military dimensions of security matter more than other dimensions of security. In the process, this chapter will try to show how rethinking the Gulf security paradigm would help improve unity and cooperation.

### *A Prioritization of the Intertwined Concerns of Regional Political and Military Security*

The threat definition of the GCC countries is focused primarily on their regional environment, even though their security policies addressing these perceived threats are also articulated in relation to the global distribution of power. In this sense, the Gulf region qualifies as a “regional security complex” (RSC).<sup>2</sup> The regionalist perspective offered by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver does not dispute the importance of interactions between actors at the global level and of the role of variables intervening at the domestic level. However, to them, “the regional level is where the extremes of national and global security interplay, and where most of the action occurs.”<sup>3</sup> Applying RSC to the Gulf requires considering that these actors' security concerns are not principally linked to global dynamics and that the region is characterized by specific elements<sup>4</sup> that isolate it from the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

<sup>2</sup> Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fears*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991, cited in Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> According to Gregory Gause, there are three security dynamics in this regard: the triangular contest for influence among Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia; transnational identity factors; and the sometimes cooperative,

the MENA region. The creation of the GCC in 1981 as a way to counterbalance the perceived threats from Iraq and Iran, both material and ideological, confirms this characterization.

This alliance behavior was a response to regional power imbalances. Despite the GCC's plans for military cooperation, which included the establishment of a Military Committee (which first met in September 1981) and the creation of the 'Peninsula Shield' joint strike force in 1986, there was little progress in the regional entity's collective defense capabilities in the 1980s. This is linked to the fact that the GCC represented, above all, a collective survival strategy aimed at protecting its members' monarchical rule against perceived ideological threats.<sup>5</sup> In fact, protection against potential material threats was implicitly outsourced to the U.S., which was the Gulf's main security provider (an arrangement made official by the Carter Doctrine in 1980).<sup>6</sup>

These dynamics of the Gulf RSC were consolidated in the 1990s. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991 confirmed that the GCC countries' chief security challenges were regional and that they needed external partners to ensure their security and stability. Since then, the GCC has bandwagoned with American power even more officially than before, a strategy that was logical given that the U.S. became the world's only great power following the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. In fact, the U.S. arguably became a full member of the Gulf RSC in 1990.

Regarding the traditional security dynamics and security strategies of the GCC countries, two important points should be stressed. First, it is crucial to understand that little (if any) distinction has been made between the political and military dimensions of their security. Examining the processes of securitization in the Gulf, Kristian Ulrichsen noted that these processes echoed Keith Krause's identification of a "security problematic" in the sense that they can often be tied to the survival of a specific referent group and that "the affiliation of the security of the state with the security of its citizens cannot be automatically assumed to be the case."<sup>7</sup> For the GCC countries, it appears that the internal and external dimensions of security, as well as its political and

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sometimes conflictual dynamics produced by the Gulf states being major oil producers (Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, p. 6).

<sup>5</sup> "Inter-state rivalry in the Gulf was transformed from an essentially narrow, inter-dynastic focus on territorial disputes into an all-encompassing ideological confrontation between revolutionary Iran and the essentially conservative regimes across the Gulf". Thomas Naff, *Gulf Security and the Iran-Iraq War*, Washington: NDU Press, 1985, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> "In his State of the Union address of 23 January 1980, US President Jimmy Carter announced that 'An attempt by any outside forces to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of [the U.S.]. And such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.'" J. E. Peterson, "The Historical Pattern of Gulf Security", in Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick (eds.), *Security in the Persian Gulf*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*, London: Hurst, 2011, p. 7. The author later underlines that these interlinked challenges to internal and external security meant that the Gulf did not undergo a similar transformation viz. the notion of "security" that occurred in Eastern Europe and Latin America during the 1990s and 2000s: "In these regions, security became linked to issues of political and economic legitimacy as well as the emergence of new concepts of cooperative security associated with a shift away from realist approaches predicated on a zero-sum notion of national security (Andrew Rathmell, Theodore Karasik and David Gompert, "A New Persian Gulf Security System," RAND Issue Paper, 2003, p. 2). No such transformation of security structures or approaches occurred in the Gulf, as the insertion of the United States as the most powerful regional actor after 1990 further destabilised and unbalanced the regional security system." Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *Ibid.*, p. 26.

military dimensions, are intertwined to such a point that they arguably merge. This interlinkage is fortified by the peculiar strategies that the GCC countries have adopted, within which their foreign and defense policies, which are articulated mainly in relation to domestic purposes, are closely entangled. Second, the aforementioned threat perception of the GCC rulers has led them to implement strategies whereby foreign policies serve as an indirect tool for ensuring national security and domestic stability and whereby arms purchases can, in fact, be considered to be an instrument of foreign policy rather than military policy.<sup>8</sup>

### *In the Face of the Arab Spring, Long-Lived Collective Security Strategies*

Since the beginning of the regional turmoil associated with the Arab Spring in 2011, the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula have faced risk factors related to both aspects of their security. Their national security could be endangered by regional disorder, which could fuel the growth of armed groups and terrorism—an outcome that has indeed come to fruition.<sup>9</sup> As for their stability, it was particularly shaken when the wave of popular uprisings, which agitated several countries in the MENA region, hit the shores of Bahrain and, to a lesser extent, Oman. Now, it is important to note that both terrorism and political upheaval are risk factors that are not confined to the Gulf; rather, they are challenges to the *status quo* in the entire MENA region. Thus, with the emergence of a multifaceted threat from the broader regional environment, the Arab Spring has upset the security landscape of the GCC countries. This raises questions about the relevance of the *Gulf RSC* as the most important level of analysis for the security dynamics of the GCC countries.<sup>10</sup> Not only does the Gulf no longer appear to be isolated from the rest of the MENA region, but the United States' position as a full member of the *Gulf RSC* seems to be evolving,<sup>11</sup> raising fears that the U.S. can no longer be relied on to ensure the Gulf's security and stability. Both changes, representing incentives to push for collective security strategies, could lead regimes to rethink their approaches to political and military security.

Certainly, when confronted with regional unrest, the GCC countries have shown that their priority is protecting their monarchical rule against any perceived attempts to undermine their authority. Animated by fears of a revolutionary contagion, local actors once again implemented the idea that “united we stand (divided we fall).” A ‘regrouping’ of the GCC’s members occurred,<sup>12</sup> illustrating

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<sup>8</sup> See Emma Soubrier, “Mirages of Power? From Sparkly Appearances to Empowered Apparatus, Evolving Trends and Implications of Arms Trade in Qatar and the UAE”, in David DesRoches and Dania Thafer (eds.), *The Arms Trade, Military Services and the Security Market in the Gulf*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016, p. 135-151.

<sup>9</sup> A suicide attack took place in Kuwait City on June 26, 2015, in a Shiite mosque, killing 27 people; since 2011, Saudi Arabia has been targeted by numerous attacks that have been claimed either by Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

<sup>10</sup> However, this assumption contradicts the rhetoric of some GCC members, particularly the KSA, according to which Iran lies at the crossroads of the two dimensions of their security. As they have repeatedly expressed, the leaders of the Arabian Peninsula feared that the regional turmoil presented Teheran with the opportunity to destabilize them internally and to adopt a more offensive stance toward them.

<sup>11</sup> The “oil for security” pact between the U.S. and the Gulf countries is not the only paradigm defining the RSC, but it is a sufficiently important factor for sub-regional security issues to be impacted by any American repositioning.

<sup>12</sup> What is referred to here is the GCC pledge of \$20 billion in financial aid to Bahrain and Oman, for instance. And while the intervention in Bahrain was led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it was officially supported by the entire GCC.

that their reflex of sticking together as authoritarian monarchies was continuing, regardless of their rivalries. This revitalized Saudi-led cooperation was then regarded as one of the key elements brought by recent events to its collective foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> However, antagonisms that had temporarily been soothed by the immediacy of the challenges were quickly revived due to what can be understood as egocentric reflexes.

There are, in fact, two levels of egoism in the Gulf's security dynamics. The first is what Robert Jervis qualifies as "rational egoism" amidst a security regime, pointing to a situation where actors place "primary value on [their] own security... and [do] not care much about other's well-being as an end in itself," an attitude that contains "the seed of their own destruction."<sup>14</sup> In the context of the Arab Spring, the local regimes' reflex of emphasizing particularistic interests before collectivistic interests was particularly visible in how regional events intensified competition between the GCC countries to take leadership within this new geostrategic environment. Unfortunately, this reflex has had disastrous consequences for the overall security of the region, and even for the Gulf actors themselves, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

The second level of egoism has to do with the GCC countries' regime-centric approach. Here again, they can be said to emphasize particularistic interests before collectivistic interests in the sense that their policy decisions, prioritizing political security, could, in fact, undermine other aspects of their security, such as military security. This echoes the idea that there might be a growing disconnection between regime survival and state security.<sup>16</sup> One telling example in support of this is the way that Qatari leaders have actively sought an independent policy from Saudi Arabia on the regional stage since 2011. While this was at least partly linked to a perceived need to counter the Kingdom's possible hegemonic views and ensure their regime's autonomy and survival, it has possibly undermined their state security in the process (as illustrated in 2014<sup>17</sup> and in June 2017). In fact, the Gulf crisis arguably serves as a perfect case study for the worsening discrepancies in the GCC countries' security policies.

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<sup>13</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution", *Orbis*, 2012, p. 98; Emma Soubrier, "Regional Disorder and New Geo-economic Order: Saudi Security Strategies in a Reshaped Middle East", *GRM Papers*, Cambridge: Gulf Research Center (GRC), September 2014, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Jervis, "Security regimes", *International Organization*, Vol. 36, Issue 02, Spring 1982, p. 364; 368.

<sup>15</sup> "[One possibly destabilizing effect of the proactive policy of the Gulf States within the MENA region in the face of the Arab Spring is linked to] the divergence of interests that these countries so actively defend". Emma Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the UAE", in Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds.), *The Gulf Small States: Foreign and Security Policies*, London: Routledge, 2016. In this regard, one can think of Qatar's competition with Saudi Arabia in Syria; the opposition between Qatar on one side, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other in Egypt; and the rivalry between Qatar and the UAE in Libya.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Barnett and Gregory Gause, "Caravans in Opposite Directions: Society, State, and the Development of Community in the GCC", in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 161-197 and Scott Cooper, "State-Centric Balance-of-Threat Theory: Explaining the Misunderstood GCC", *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Winter 2003/4, p. 306-349.

<sup>17</sup> Olivier Da Lage, « Les monarchies du Golfe se déchirent en public », *Institut MEDEA*, 17 March 2014.

*The Gulf crisis: When the Over-Prioritization of One Aspect of Security Becomes Counterproductive*

In a way reminiscent of what happened in March 2014 (although on a whole new level of intensity), the KSA, the UAE, and Bahrain (joined this time by Egypt) suspended their diplomatic relations with Qatar on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and imposed an economic and political blockade on the small emirate. This decision was motivated by several different concerns, as illustrated by the 13 demands that the “Quartet” addressed to Doha by way of Kuwait on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017. Among these demands were the severing of Qatari ties with the Muslim Brotherhood (considered by Abu Dhabi to be the primary threat to regional security and stability) and the reduction of its diplomatic relations with Iran (the primary threat in Riyadh’s eyes). These two demands constitute what are generally considered to be the KSA’s and the UAE’s most important concerns.

What this means is that Qatari policies were perceived by the leadership of the two neighboring countries as threats to the security and stability of their own states and regimes—although they also and perhaps most importantly represented challenges to the ambitions of the Princes in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, against the background of a continued narcissism of the small difference.<sup>18</sup> As a result of evolving regional and global dynamics, the monarchs and crown princes of the Gulf countries have indeed had a new window of opportunity to push for their own, sometimes personal (and often competing) interests.<sup>19</sup>

While the Gulf crisis was, in any case, linked to concerns rooted in the political dimension of security, whether at the level of the monarchical regime or the Princes, it is important to underline that the crisis took its toll on the populations and economies of the countries involved in the rift. Economically, Qatar has, unsurprisingly, suffered the greatest losses—although it has been widely recognized as “weathering the storm,”<sup>20</sup> but the rift has harmed all of the Gulf economies,<sup>21</sup> and Qatar’s three neighbors have also felt the self-inflicted blow. Given their incredible wealth, this economic pain might have seemed like a reasonable price to pay for Doha (which they consider to be a tiny arrogant neighbor) to bend to their will. Alternatively, the blockaders may have simply miscalculated the leverage that they needed for this to happen.

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<sup>18</sup> “The competition arising between the two small Princes-States [of Qatar and the UAE] can be understood in sociological terms, and be related to the Freudian concept of the ‘narcissism of small differences’, that is ‘the phenomenon that it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other’ (Freud 1961: 61)” (Emma Soubrier, “Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the UAE”, p. 132). This Freudian interpretation of regional politics has also been developed at length in Mohammed Hashem Al-Hashemi, “Bitter Brethren: Freud’s Narcissism of Minor Differences and the Gulf Divide”, in Andreas Krieg (Ed.), *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 53-69.

<sup>19</sup> See Emma Soubrier, “Global and regional crises, empowered Gulf rivals, and the evolving paradigm of regional security”, *POMEPS Studies 34: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, Washington: Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), March 2019, p. 63-66.

<sup>20</sup> Carly West, “Qatar: Beyond the blockade”, *Global Risk Insights* (website), October 16, 2018. <https://globalriskinsights.com/2018/10/qatar-beyond-blockade/>

<sup>21</sup> See Jane Kinninmont, “The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis”, *Chatham House*, May 2019. [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-05-30-Gulf%20Crisis\\_0.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-05-30-Gulf%20Crisis_0.pdf)

As for how the crisis has impacted the populations, the strict suspension of mobility to and from Qatar by the KSA, the UAE, and Bahrain has torn apart numerous homes across the Arabian Peninsula, where many families born from regional tribal interlinkages have been sitting on opposite sides of borders for decades. While this consequence has slipped under the radar of many analyses focusing on the political and possibly military implications of the rift, one could argue that these apparently softer aspects of the conflict are just as important for two reasons.

The first reason is that this example is one of the clearest illustrations of the incongruities that can arise from the over-prioritization of the interests and ambitions of leaders to the detriment of what constitutes the national interest, which necessarily has human and societal components. The second one is that these very dimensions, particularly what some have anticipated as a generalized and lasting distrust within the populations of the Gulf towards neighboring countries' leadership, are bound to further complicate any reconciliation process between the GCC member states.

It is possible, however, to argue that it would be better to end this rift sooner than later, given that, as long as regional cooperation lays in ruins, the GCC countries' ability to address critical challenges will remain seriously hindered. If anything good comes from the Gulf crisis, it could be that it leads to a reevaluation of the centrality of the "softer" dimensions of Gulf security. Indeed, numerous issues related to the economic, societal, and environmental dimensions of security are on the rise and becoming increasingly urgent. Now, in addition to the risks they pose in themselves, they have "the potential, if left unchecked or inadequately tackled, to strike at the heart of the social contract and redistributive mechanisms that bind state and society in the Arab oil monarchies"<sup>22</sup> and thereby threaten the very stability that the three Prince-States have been overprioritizing for the past decade.

### ***Critical Challenges on the Rise: Revived Economic, Societal, and Environmental Risk Factors***

Amidst the GCC countries' nontraditional security issues, economic challenges related to the political economy of resource distribution and growing resource scarcity can be deemed to be the most important risk factor because these monarchies' survival strategies have relied greatly on their huge economic resources. Dropping oil prices from the summer of 2014 to the beginning of 2016<sup>23</sup> have exemplified this risk, as they have placed important economic pressure on the GCC countries. It is worth noting that this pressure came alongside already-existing energy security challenges linked to shale gas and growing domestic consumption of domestic oil production.<sup>24</sup> In fact, preparing for the post-oil era represented an economic challenge for most of the GCC countries long before these recent evolutions. The national "Visions" and diversification plans from every GCC state since the mid-1990s merely confirm the importance of addressing this problem. This is vitally important for the GCC leaders because the financial resources

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<sup>22</sup> Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> See Steven Mufson, "Oil prices top \$50 a barrel for the first time in 2016", *The Washington Post*, 26 May 2016.

<sup>24</sup> On these matters, see Jim Krane, *Energy Kingdoms: Oil and Political Survival in the Persian Gulf*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

accumulated by oil production and centralized in sovereign wealth funds have been not only the cornerstone of the social contract and the redistributive mechanisms on which their political order as rentier states has relied<sup>25</sup> but also the heart of the *quid pro quo* dynamic whereby Western allies have provided national security guarantees and supported the Gulf monarchs in exchange for investments in their national economies—through arms purchases, for instance.

In addition to crucial economic challenges, one should not underestimate other long-term issues, such as societal risk factors. Societal security “concerns the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats.”<sup>26</sup> The GCC countries facing the greatest difficulties in this regard are the “national-minority states”<sup>27</sup>—namely, Qatar and the UAE, as well as Kuwait, where this factor is less salient because nationals constitute more than 30% of the population, whereas they account for possibly less than 10% in Qatar and the UAE. In these two countries, the severe domestic demographic imbalances increasingly entail societal security challenges as many nationals regard the presence of foreigners as a threat to their society’s identity.<sup>28</sup> This also represents a societal security challenge for the state itself, since the concretization of tensions between different populations could lead to intense internal destabilization. This explains the extreme social fragmentation in these countries’ urban fabrics—a short-term strategy—and the attempts of every GCC country to implement nationalization programs to reduce their dependence on foreign labor and to increase the participation of their local populations in the private sector—a long-term strategy that has become even more critical as these states face an increasing challenge of unemployment among nationals.

Finally, in terms of environmental security, there are three interrelated and urgent issues that the GCC countries need to address soon. The first issue is climate change itself. A study published in *Nature Climate Change* showed that the combination of severe humidity levels and rising temperatures caused by global warming could threaten human life in many Gulf population centers by the end of the century.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the combination of climate change with population growth has transformed two other issues into existential challenges: water security

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<sup>25</sup> “The old social contracts wherein patronage systems, flush with resource wealth, buttressed loyalty to leaders are slowly eroding”. Fatima Ayub, “Introduction”, in European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), *What does the Gulf think about the Arab Awakening?* London: ECFR, April 2013, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ole Wæver et al., *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*, London: Pinter, 1993, p. 23. The term was first used in 1991 (Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fears*, op. cit.) as one of the five sectors where the state could be threatened. Ole Wæver, however, proposed a reconceptualization of this theory. While keeping societal security as one sector of state security, he argues that it has also become a referent object of security in its own right. Whereas state security is concerned about threats to its sovereignty, societal security is concerned about threats to a society’s identity.

<sup>27</sup> That is, “countries where nationals (citizens holding nationality) are a minority among the population” (Koji Horinuki, “Controversies over Labour Naturalisation Policy and its Dilemmas: 40 Years of Emiratisation in the United Arab Emirates”, *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1-2, 2011, p. 41).

<sup>28</sup> Various interviews in Abu Dhabi and Doha between March 2013 and May 2014. Nationals are particularly concerned with some Westerners’ behaviors, which represent religious offenses and threaten their cultural identity.

<sup>29</sup> Jeremy S. Pal and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, “Future temperature in southwest Asia projected to exceed a threshold for human adaptability”, *Nature Climate Change*, 26 October 2015, and John Schwartz, “Deadly Heat Is Forecast in Persian Gulf by 2100”, *The New York Times*, 26 October 2015.



and food security. In the UAE, for example, it is estimated that the country's fresh and brackish water reserves could be exhausted by 2050.<sup>30</sup> Taken together, these nontraditional security challenges could deeply impact the political economy of the Gulf states and complicate the transition into a post-oil era as long as governments try to address them while sticking to the traditional dynamics of rentier forms of governance centered mostly on particularistic interests and the political and military dimensions of security.

Indeed, it seems that the GCC leaders have tried to tackle these issues without reevaluating their threat priorities and reconsidering their preferred policy focuses. Thus, though they have, for example, placed educational reform and the acquisition of knowledge at the heart of their ambitious economic diversification projects, budget allocations for education remain much smaller than military expenditures, a clear indication of these leaders' priorities.<sup>31</sup> Another example is that the leaders of the GCC countries have tried to address the issue of food security, the urgency of which was confirmed by the 2007 food crisis, by buying or renting farmland in countries such as Pakistan, Sudan, Indonesia, and even the United States.<sup>32</sup>

It has been underlined that the securitization of food and water access came "in response to the short-term phenomena of high commodity and fuel prices that triggered social unrest in 2007-8. It did not represent part of a coherent re-conceptualisation of the meaning and object of security."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, not only do the GCC countries' strategic choices illustrate their continued emphasis on the traditional dimensions of their security (related mostly to the political sector), they also show that these actors keep acting along egocentric logics. Yet it can be argued that their multidimensional security issues would be best addressed with collective strategies, which would imply a deep reorganization of their security approaches.

### ***Rethinking the Gulf Security Model***

There are several levels of possible multilateral cooperation for tackling the multifaceted security challenges that the GCC countries currently face. One level is the Gulf as a region. Evolving security challenges may push local actors not only to become more integrated within the GCC but also toward the idea of a long-term, indigenous, homegrown security system that would include Iraq and Iran, as well as Yemen. Of course, this option appears very unlikely in the short term. However, it is worth noting that this arrangement would make sense in terms of economic and societal security because these non-GCC Gulf countries possess the human resources that most GCC countries lack. Specifically, Iran represents a pool of highly skilled

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<sup>30</sup> Philippe Boulanger, « Les défis géopolitiques d'une nouvelle puissance régionale : les Emirats arabes unis », *Herodote*, No. 133, 2009/2, p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> In the UAE, "although the federal budget allocation for education now exceeds \$2 billion, this is only a third of the allocation for military expenditures and, in relative terms, is about a quarter of the educational expenditure of some other Arab states". Christopher Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 151.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Dockès, « Les fonds souverains et l'impérialisme d'émergence », *Revue d'économie financière*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2009, p. 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, p. 116.

specialists who could help the GCC countries pursue educational reforms and economic diversification. Furthermore, generating closer cooperation on economic, social, and environmental matters could mitigate perceived challenges to political and military security.<sup>34</sup> On this issue, GCC leaders have often referred to the pacification of Europe as a model that they wish to follow (though their plans generally do not involve Iran or Iraq).

Considering the negligible likelihood of a radical evolution toward GCC-Iranian cooperation in the near future, other levels of multilateral cooperation may be more promising in the short term. These levels include the formation of polygonal partnerships between the GCC and other countries from the broader MENA region and beyond. The idea here would be to capitalize on strong bilateral relationships and build multi-sided cooperation arrangements with MENA countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, or with countries outside the Arab world, such as Russia, China, and India.

Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey offer the same advantages as Iran in terms of human resources, as well as the additional incentive of being Sunni countries. The rationale for stronger multilateral partnerships with Russia, China, and India is linked to the fact that they are “emerging countries” that arguably share common concerns. Furthermore, it has been claimed that the GCC countries could “use the India-China-Iran bonhomie to their advantage.”<sup>35</sup> India and China, as well as Russia, could indeed serve as honest brokers in mending GCC-Iranian relations. Another level of cooperation could consist of region-to-region partnerships, such as Gulf-Europe or Gulf-Asia cooperation. The latter represents an opportunity to soothe infra-regional tensions, such as those between China and India,<sup>36</sup> and tackle emerging inter-regional competition relating to, for example, China’s and the GCC countries’ access to farmland in Africa, which could be used to address their respective food security challenges.

In all these scenarios, there is still the risk that international actors will continue to emphasize particularistic interests before collectivistic interests, one of the “myriad cross-cutting obstacles to regional and global governance.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, the GCC countries will most likely stick to these reflexes since they tend not only to emphasize national interests over regional interests but also monarchical interests over national interests. The Gulf crisis certainly serves as the primary

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, “bilateral UAE-Iran trade statistics highlight the significance of economic interactions as a basis for broadening the common areas of interest. . . Simple logic would suggest that a possible solution to the UAE-Iran island dispute would be the creation of a ‘mutual economic zone’ in Abu Musa island where the two states have joint sovereignty. But politics in this region often defies logic”. Saideh Lotfian, “A Regional Security System in the Persian Gulf”, in Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick (eds.), *Security in the Persian Gulf*, p. 117.

<sup>35</sup> N. Janardhan, “China, India, and the Persian Gulf: Converging Interests?”, in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011, p. 232.

<sup>36</sup> Indian diplomats have expressed their unease at China’s rapid emergence as a major actor in the Gulf and have gone as far as stating that “China’s proactive focus on expanding ties with the region presents a growing challenge to India. . . Geo-economics is increasingly going to determine geopolitics”. Ranjit Gupta, “China as a Factor in India’s Relations with the GCC Countries”, in Inder Pal Khosla (ed.), *India and the Gulf*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2009, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Abdullah Baabood, “Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States” Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU,” in Gerd Nonneman (ed.), *Analyzing Middle Eastern Foreign Policies*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 148.

example of this pattern. For things to go any differently, local actors might actually need to completely revise their outlook on “the meaning and object of security.”

The traditional approach to Gulf security “views the world from a state-centric (if not statist) perspective [and relies on a] traditional (Realist) argument [which] turns out to be rather unrealistic.”<sup>38</sup> For the GCC countries, (in)securitization processes regarding the political and military sectors produce both security and insecurity.<sup>39</sup> An alternative would be to adopt a ‘critical’ approach.

Critical security scholars argue that states are means and not the ends of security policy and, hence, should be de-centered in scholarly studies as well as in policy practice. These scholars do not ‘securitize’ issues but ‘politicize security.’<sup>40</sup> This process allows them to reveal the political and constitutive character of security thinking, point to “men’s and women’s experience of threat,”<sup>41</sup> and “de-center the military and state-focused threats that dominate traditional security agendas.”<sup>42</sup> As argued by theorists of international relations, “a reformed agenda must seek to open up the potential for human agency to build cooperation and trust at all levels of political community.”<sup>43</sup> In effect, highlighting human insecurities and reprioritizing risk factors accordingly could lead the GCC countries to rethink their security dynamics, move toward more cooperation, and eventually mitigate all threats, including those related to political and military security.

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So far, the GCC countries have mostly organized their strategies around political and military security. Today, they face acute challenges whereby prioritizing political security sometimes appears to undermine military security (as experienced by Qatar in 2014 and since the beginning of the Gulf crisis). Overemphasizing the two also places additional pressure on the “softer” security dimensions, which may be as important a challenge for every GCC state.

One way to address the multiple facets of security would be to capitalize on regional confidence-building measures. Now, “if an issue is successfully securitised, and accepted as such by the relevant audience, the principal actor feels empowered to take extraordinary measures to

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<sup>38</sup> Pinar Bilgin, “Critical Theory”, in Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Security Studies: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 93-94.

<sup>39</sup> Didier Bigo, “International Political Sociology”, in Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Ibid.*, p. 116. “It is important to deepen the analysis of security, to look at the ‘guts’ of society. But of course, by doing so, the heterogeneity resurfaces and destroys the pretence of homogeneity of the state that has been so important in IR”. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>40</sup> See Ken Booth, “Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 3, 1991, p. 527-45 and Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Hayward Alker, “Emancipation in the Critical Security Studies Project”, in Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, p. 195.

<sup>42</sup> Pinar Bilgin, “Critical Theory”, p. 98-99.

<sup>43</sup> Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, “Uncertainty”, in Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Security Studies*, p. 142; 148.

combat it.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, it can be argued that shifting the focus in terms of what issue is securitized could greatly help with regional pacification and stabilization. The region has no shortage of alternative referent objects of security beyond the monarchical regime that could be prioritized in the future and, thus, empower actors to move toward more cooperation. In this respect, and when it comes to resolving the Gulf crisis, which itself is a telling example of these conundrums, it is perhaps good news that policymaking in these countries essentially “[depends] on a handful of senior leaders whose views could change.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Kinninmont, “The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis”, p. 5.