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Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States

Dr. Abdulkhaleq Abdullah | May 2012

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Abstract

Regardless of the final outcome of the Arab Spring, it is beyond doubt that the Arab Homeland is undergoing an exceptional revolutionary moment and has witnessed a formative year, which does not often occur in history. Thus, the year 2011 will enter history as an exceptional Arab year, the likes of which come only once in a lifetime, and once in every generation. Not only was 2011 an exceptional year, but it was also a formative one, with transformations of such depth and magnitude that they have cancelled all of the postulates, institutions, personalities, mentalities, and behaviors that existed prior to 2011, while laying the foundations for what would come to replace them. This rupture was total, comprehensive, and, perhaps, final. The events of 2011 will enter history as foundational events, not only for Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, but also for the entire Arab region. What has been confirmed is that the era of Arab stasis, surrender, frustration, and misery, which lasted too long, extending over more than four decades, has finally reached its end.

Introduction*

The Arab Spring¹ was a comprehensive Arab phenomenon that made no exceptions, even in the Arabian Gulf, the economically-prosperous part of the Arab Homeland. With its resounding slogans “the people want to bring down the regime” and “leave,” the Arab Spring successfully executed four revolutions: the December 17 Revolution in Tunisia that ended thirty years of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s rule, the January 25 Revolution in Egypt that sprung from Tahrir Square and quickly put an end to three

* This study is an expanded and updated version of a paper that was published in the journal *al-Mustaqbal alArabi*, issue 391, September 2011.

¹ Depicting the historic events currently witnessed by the Arab region as “the Arab Spring” is an over-simplification that could misrepresent the value of these foundational shifts. Moreover, the term “Spring” has been borrowed from various international revolutionary and reformist experiments that greatly differ in their course and background from what is currently taking place throughout the Arab Homeland. The *Oxford Dictionary* lists the Polish Springs of 1956 and 1982, the Seoul Spring of 1979, and the Prague Spring of 1968. The term “Arab Spring” evokes positive connotations, chiefly the ending of the phase of stasis, immobility, and inaction, and the return of life, renaissance, and prosperity. There is an important book by the Egyptian philosopher Abd al-Rahman Badawi entitled *The Spring of Greek Thought*, a reference to the opening and effervescence and spread of the Greek civilization, followed by another book entitled *The Autumn of Greek Thought*, detailing the decline and disintegration of the Greek culture. Aside from the debate on the connotations of the term “Arab Spring,” it was first mentioned in an article by Marc Lynch published in *Foreign Policy* on January 6, 2011, and saw its usage quickly spreading in the Arab and international media, making it into an unavoidable appellation. Some were pleased by the concept of the Arab Spring due to its positive associations. Until a more accurate description is agreed-upon to refer to the Arab transformations of 2011, this term will be employed in this study, with reservations. It is, however, incredible that the Arab lands would experience historic transformations only to import their appellation from abroad. The other, less used, terms, include: the Arab Uprising, the Arab Awakening, the Arab Revolution, the Arab Revolt, the Arab Unrest, and the Arab Transformation of 2011. The 2011 events were also given more precise depictions, such as the “‘Leave’ Revolution,” in reference to the most prominent slogan to be heard in the Arab street, demanding the departure of the president and his regime, and indicating that the people can no longer tolerate their persistence. Arabs also used the term *habba* (literally meaning the act of rising up), but this term did not meet positive echoes. Reservations exist toward all these appellations, most of which are valid. What is for sure is that a new situation is currently being shaped, but there is no Arab agreement, so far, on naming this paramount event. As for the Arab publics, they have clearly chosen the term “Revolution” to describe their uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and even Bahrain.

The first book on the Arab Spring in the Arabic language was edited by Abd al-Ilah Belkiz and published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in September 2011 under the title: *The Arab Spring ... Where to?*. The work included a number of studies published in *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*. English-language books on the topic were first published in July 2011 (See: Filliu, 2011). Also see: Michael Hudson, “Awakening, cataclysm or just a series of events?: Reflections on current waves of protest in the Arab world,” *Jadaliyya*, May 6, 2011, and Rami Khouri, “Drop the Orientalist term ‘Arab Spring’,” *Daily Star*, August 17, 2011.

decades of Hosni Mubarak's rule, the February 17 Revolution in Libya that succeeded, after a bloody conflict that cost more than 30,000 martyrs, in dismantling the forty-year-old regime of Muammar al-Qadhafi, and, finally, the February 13 Revolution in Yemen, which led to the resignation of Ali Abdallah Saleh after protracted efforts and a consensus-based initiative presented by Gulf states, crowned with the election of a new president for Yemen.²

However, the Arab Spring continues on in the existence of Arab revolts that have not completely achieved their mission yet; at the forefront of these comes the March 15 Revolution in Syria and the February 14 revolution in Bahrain. The Arab Spring is not limited to the successful revolutions, or those that are currently on the move, but it also includes a number of transformations and delayed democratic reformist demands that await a fuse that is yet to come, despite the presence of revolutionary and reformist circumstances throughout the Arab Homeland. The second year of the Arab Spring may be more significant than the first, especially in terms of the capacity of the revolution to achieve its main goals – making the Arab Homeland more democratic than it has been over the last 50 years.³

Regardless of the final outcome of the revolutions, it is beyond doubt that the Arab Homeland is undergoing an exceptional revolutionary moment and has witnessed a formative year, which does not often occur in history. Thus, the year 2011 will enter history as an exceptional Arab year, the likes of which come only once in a lifetime, and once in every generation. Not only was 2011 an exceptional year, but it was also a formative one, with transformations of such depth and magnitude that they have cancelled all of the postulates, institutions, personalities, mentalities, and behaviors that existed prior to 2011, while laying the foundations for what would come to replace them. This rupture was total, comprehensive, and, perhaps, final. The events of 2011 will enter history as foundational events, not only for Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, but also for the entire Arab region. What has been confirmed is that the era of Arab stasis, surrender, frustration, and misery, which lasted too long, extending over more than four decades, has finally reached its end.

² "Saleh personally oversees the assumption ceremony of the new President," *al-Khaleej*, February 27, 2012, p. 21.

³ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, "Arab Spring could deliver more good news," *Gulf News*, January 1, 2012.

The exceptional and foundational transformations of 2011 have engendered an Arab psychological, political, and intellectual state that is markedly different from the mainstream prior to the Arab Spring. A revolution took place in the Arab political reality, flanked by a revolution that is more important, which is a real revolution in peoples' hearts and minds, permitting the Arab psychological state to shift from desperation to hopefulness and from excessive pessimism to optimism – even if it is guarded optimism. This spring-like, contemplative psychology of the Arab state is a foundational case-in-point, representing the most important gain from the transformations of 2011. It goes without saying that a formative year is usually a difficult and long one, with the most difficult task represented not in ending the old regime, but in building a new one and heralding a hopeful dawn, while laying the foundations for a different era that is prone to all possibilities – positive and negative. Birth does not take place without pain and hurt and blood, and often times requires decisive surgical interventions, the results and outcomes of which cannot be known in advance.

In addition to the characteristics of exceptionalism and foundationalism, the transformations of 2011 were also sudden. These shifts came as a complete surprise at home and abroad. These revolutions were, however, prefaced by popular protest movements in several Arab states, capitals, and cities. The conditions of repression, injustice, despotism, and corruption have, for an extended period, been an omen for the nearing of a certain revolution in Egypt and in other Arab states. Nevertheless, the timing of the 2011 revolution, its maturity, flow, spontaneity, speed, and, above all, the fact that it was an Arab revolution, created an atmosphere of surprise and bafflement and exceeded all expectations. Everyone was taken by surprise by the explosion of the youth, the millions taking to the street, the collapse of the regimes followed by flight and quick resignations, and even the unorthodox slogans coupled with the absence of ready-made leaderships and ideological frameworks. However, the greatest surprise was the regimes being "caught unaware," as they felt secure in their present and future. The revolution struck the despotic regimes where they least expected, and the blow came as a surprise and from a dead, and fatal, angle.

The most notable characteristic of the 2011 transformations remains the fact that they were youth-driven transformations in the first place. The 2011 transformations were sudden, exceptional, formative, and youthful. This youthful character of the revolutions deserves a few remarks, for without the participation of the youth this revolutionary momentum that overtook the Arab lands could not have begun and persisted. The

moment of freedom came to the Arab region mainly due to the will of the youth. The older generation, by-and-large, believed that the Arab youth was spoiled, nonchalant, intellectually lazy, distant from politics, and that the major causes fell outside the scope of interest of this generation, which is absorbed in its virtual world. This belief was put to question when a young man suddenly came out and was transformed into a political giant with a first-rate political awareness, making political demands, and raising political slogans.

The pacified Arab youth suddenly became a political threat, shaking the ground under the feet of the rulers. The political boldness of this youth has exceeded all expectations and scenarios. The young Arab man and woman have overthrown the tyrants of the nation, creating a gaping hole in the security apparatus that protects the regime, and causing a deep fissure in the wall of fear that controlled the minds and hearts of the generation of the parents and the grandparents. The youth who frequent the internet chat rooms, Facebook, and Twitter have made a historic, foundational, and exceptional achievements, showing their readiness to die in order to affirm the value of freedom in Arab life. These youth have presented the world with its first spontaneous revolution, without the standard leaderships and ideologies.

History will, for years, debate what made the Arab youth a political giant in 2011, and how the children of the regime, which it took as "its" loyal children, turned against it. However, the "children of the regime" turned into revolutionaries who eventually brought it down, a replay Prophet Moses's experience, in that he was raised in the household of the Pharaoh only to tear it down. How did this political activism come about? Where did this revolutionary momentum among the Arab youth come from? And why did all this take place in 2011, not before or after?

The young Muhammad al-Bouazizi burned himself on December 17, 2010, with this act of self-immolation turning into a positive energy that changed Tunisia and the entirety of Arab history. Similarly, a recording in the voice of the young Egyptian woman Asma Mahfuz, along with her picture on YouTube, prompted hundreds of thousands of Egyptians to file into Tahrir Square to create the revolution of January 25, one of the most passive and peaceful revolutions in history. The perennial political stasis was ended thanks to the youth, and the Arab Homeland has become more free, democratic, and hopeful than it was at the beginning of 2011. Due to these revolutions, the Arabs today are experiencing a new psychological state. If the Arab peoples believed, until

recently, that it was impossible to reform the regime, they have now come to believe in the possibility of overthrowing it. Our generation used to believe that the Arab peoples were not fit for freedom, or that freedom was not fit for them, but the youth have changed all these dated and racist beliefs.

Before 2011, the Arab Nation would plunge deeper into death with each new day, along with the Arab peoples. The youth looked for a ray of hope that would quench their thirst for a safe and dignified life, as with the youth in other parts of the world. The Arab elites used to call for reform in the conferences and symposiums held in Western capitals, demanding it in its minimal form. However, the Arab despotic regimes were stubborn and vain, keeping no limits in their monopolization of power and wealth – having believed that the Arab individual has been broken and has completely and irrevocably surrendered, that the Arab spirit has been extinguished, and that the nation has aged and begun to expel its youth and talents, who have spread throughout the four continents of the world.

When the Arab individual reached the stage of desperation and surrender, believing that all hope was lost in the Arab land, the gates of heaven opened and fate answered the call, with the dawn breaking in Tunisia with the Jasmine Revolution, and the sun rose again over Cairo with the revolution of the youth of January 25, and when the sun rises in Egypt, it shines on the entire Arab Nation. Small revolts and popular protest movements had taken place in several Arab capitals and cities before the Arab Revolution of 2011. However, the timing, maturity, spontaneity, flow, and speed of the 2011 revolution, and the fact that it was authentically Arab, all came as an impressive surprise, exceeding expectations and debunking the theory that freedom does not suit the Arabs, and that the Arabs do not suit freedom.⁴

The regimes were unwise to feel secure about their fate; the Arab Spring came after the accumulation of decades of frustration, desperation, anger, and failure, after decades of policies and behaviors of “humiliation” that were practiced by the regimes

⁴ No theory is capable of predicting revolutions. If such was possible, revolutions would not have taken place throughout history. Historical experiences show that when a popular revolution takes place in a given state, it tends to quickly spread in its geographic surrounding. In other terms, revolutions are contagious with no immunization possible. This was the case of the Arab Revolution of 2011, which spread throughout the Arab Homeland, with 20 Arab states witnessing one form or another of protest demonstrations. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates remain the exception so far.

with such success that the citizen was made to lose faith in himself, his homeland, his nation, and his future, in addition to decades of decline in the Arab developmental and political circumstances. The Arab Spring came after decades of despotism, corruption, repression, poverty, unemployment, and the regimes of terror that were based on intelligence services and that were incapable of achieving even a modicum of dignified life for millions of Arabs. The Arab region was filled with failed states, fragile states, immobile states, satellite states, closed states, and despotic states, with a minority of Arab countries that would be categorized as economically and socially prosperous. The yoke of the regimes had lasted too long, believed, until the Arab revolutions erupted without warning and from beyond the realm of expectations, that their future was also secure.

The 2011 events have surprised everyone at home and abroad due to their cascading momentum, persistence, and speed with which they reached all Arab states, including oil states in the Arabian Gulf, which were thought to be safe from revolutions and reformist demands.⁵ The question is: how did the foundational, exceptional, and sudden transformations of 2011 affect the Gulf Cooperation Council states? How did the Arab Gulf States deal with what came to be known as the Arab Spring? Do these states have immunity against the winds of change that are raging over the region? How did these transformations affect the security dossier and the balance of power in the Arabian Gulf? Did they make the Arabian Gulf more or less safe?

Despite the claim by Arab Gulf states that they are not concerned by the winds of change, and that they represent an exceptional case in the Arab surrounding, and are endowed with a special immunity against the movement of democratic reform, the truth came to negate these notions. The winds of change did visit the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and these countries dealt with the Arab Revolution of 2011 with care and concern, especially having closely observed what went on in Bahrain.

The revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt inspired wide popular sections in the Gulf, especially among the youth and on social networking websites. Numerous attempts were made, both in the virtual world and in reality to transmit these experiences and the call for popular protests and the raising of reformist demands; these propositions, however, faltered when faced with the Gulf circumstances that opposed change. In the Gulf, the forces of persistence and continuity are far stronger than those of reform and

⁵ Bahrain, Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman.

change, with the governments employing their massive resources and capabilities, including the creation of 130,000 new positions only in security-related sectors, in order to prevent the spread of the syndrome of change into the Arabian Gulf.

However, it became clear that, no matter how strongly the Arab Gulf countries affirm their specificity these states do not exist in a vacuum, and cannot remain isolated from the events in their Arab surroundings for long. The general rule is that these states are an inseparable part of the Arab regional system; they are affected by the happenings around them and they affect them, and this rule applies to the influence of the Arab Spring on the GCC countries.⁶

The Arab Spring has infiltrated the GCC countries, but the repercussions and manifestations varied from one Gulf state to another. The winds of change have entered some of these states swiftly and inconspicuously, while visiting other states with strength and violence. Some Arab states are unnerved by the Arab Spring, while others celebrate it and benefit from its fruits.⁷ Some Gulf states suffered heavy damages due to the repercussions of the Arab Spring while others appear to be unconcerned by the waves of change, having succeeded in exiting the turmoil of 2011 with the least damages, and having dealt with the Arab Spring as an opportunity to support their stature and their media and diplomatic, and even commercial, position within the Arab regional system. There is a great difference between the effect of the Arab Spring in Bahrain and Qatar, Oman and the Emirates, or Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Elements of Weakness and Strength in the Gulf Political and Social Situation

Despite the varying influence, the Arab Spring has revealed that the GCC community features elements of strength as well as numerous elements of frailty. It became clear that Bahrain was the soft belly of the Gulf States⁸ and the country most prone to

⁶ See: Abdulla, 2006, and Idriss, 2000.

⁷ Ulrichsen, 2011. The author has benefited from the rich material presented in the “Tweets” of Sultan Bin Saoud al-Qassemi, whose contributions on Twitter have transformed into a virtual library that is open for everybody and that includes news, reports, and analyses on the Arab Spring, especially in its repercussions on the Arab Gulf states. See: @sultanalqassemi.

⁸ For further details on why Bahrain was the Gulf case most prone to being affected by events in the Arab Homeland, see: Ali Fakhro, “The repercussions of Arab democracy movements on Bahrain,” *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, Issue 390, August 2011.

contracting the contagion of Arab revolutions. Bahrain has undergone a bitter, difficult, violent, and unfortunate experience, and was among the biggest losers of the Arab revolutions of 2011 on all levels – the government, the people, the economy, the society, and international stature. The early popular protests in Bahrain began as the expression of rightful, legitimate, and noncontroversial demands, even from the perspective of the government, which has agreed to dialogue with the opposition in order to enact the appropriate constitutional reforms for the post-February 14, 2011 phase, corresponding with the ten-year anniversary of the National Pact. There is a full national consensus in Bahrain over the necessity of achieving social justice and constitutional and democratic reform.

At the beginnings of the Arab Spring, Bahrain was already on the cusp of achieving the transformation into a modern constitutional monarchy, a veritable role model for other regional states. However, the opposition escalated without bounds, and its legitimate reform demands quickly deviated into revolutionary acts,⁹ and a provocative rhetoric that aimed “vulgar insults toward some of the prominent state figures,”¹⁰ to raising unrealistic slogans that threaten national unity and call for the overthrow of the regime and the ending of the rule of the Khalifa dynasty and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Bahraini society slipped into an unprecedented state of sectarian polarization that threatens its national unity. After Bahrain was inching closer toward constitutional monarchy, it suddenly found itself gravitating toward sectarian violence and the possibilities of civil war between the Sunni and the Shi’a.¹¹

These unfortunate developments brought about violent government intervention in order to end the protest at the Pearl Roundabout, the symbol of the Bahraini Spring,¹² with the assistance of Desert Shield forces, the military arm of GCC states.¹³ The events

⁹ A notable example was, according to Dr. Ali Fakhro, “Absurdist action reaching its peak with the decision to demonstrate in the Rifa area, in front of the King’s palace,” (Ibid., p. 116).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹ Peter Pearson, “Bahrain and the Arab Spring: Time for some Realism,” *The Telegraph*, August 5, 2011.

¹² The Bahraini government dismantled the monument at the Pearl Roundabout on March 18, 2011, renaming it the Faruq Roundabout, an appellation that carries sectarian and historic connotations.

¹³ The Desert Shield units entered Bahrain on March 16, 2011, and recent news reports have been claiming that the Bahraini government has decided to employ non-regular forces from Pakistan to deal with the popular uprising: Bruce Reidal, “The New Bahrain-Pakistan Alliance,” *The National Interest*, August 2, 2011.

of Bahrain, the smallest and least populous of Arab states, represent a qualitative setback for the demands of democratic reform, not only in Bahrain but throughout the Arabian Gulf. Bahrain will be in need of a long period of calm in order to regain its vitality, overcome the sharp sectarian polarization, and be healed from the bitter effects of the use of violence;¹⁴ this should be in the aim of reforming what can be reformed, as well as a return to the phase preceding the Bahraini Spring through national dialogue.¹⁵ Political crisis endures in the Kingdom of Bahrain, which is experiencing a sharp sectarian division; however, the first anniversary of the February 14 Revolution has passed in peace, without any casualties and with a minimum of violent confrontations.

Oman represents the second weak spot in the GCC community; however, unlike Bahrain, Oman was capable of peacefully managing the reformist demands and the popular protests. One of the biggest surprises of the Arab Spring, in its GCC version, was the arrival of the Spring into Oman, traditionally known for its internal calm and stability, its geographic distance from its Arab surrounding, as well as its political isolation. Political and geographic isolation were not sufficient to stop the winds of change, which swept without warning, nearly engulfing Oman. The storm over Oman was strong, and could have been fatal: the peaceful popular demonstrations began on January 17 in several cities, escalating gradually, and then suddenly stopped on May 13. The numbers that participated in these protests were few, never reaching into the thousands, and the Omani government response was swift and devoid of violence,¹⁶ through a policy of "flexible dealing," instead of roughness, the government was capable of absorbing the accumulated frustration over perennial corruption.¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Violence and repression did not stop against the protests, which persisted until the end of 2011, Anthony Shadid, "Bahrain Boils Under the Lid of Repression," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2011.

¹⁵ The National Dialogue began in July 2011 with the participation of 300 national figures and the leadership of Khalifa al-Dhahrani, instead of the Crown Prince Sheikh Salman Bin Hamad. However, the National Dialogue ended without answering any of the demands raised on Pearl Roundabout, leading to the withdrawal of the opposition, which was represented in the Wifaq Association that is reputed for its moderate political and intellectual positions, and has always distanced itself from raising the slogan of bringing down the regime in Bahrain.

¹⁶ Some of these demonstrations ended with the intervention of security and the killing of three individuals; news reports have lately spoken of the renewal of protests in the Omani city of Sohar. "Over 1000 protesters in a Standoff with Security Forces in Sohar," *Gulf News*, July 29, 2011.

¹⁷ al-Jamali, 2011.

government also succeeded in absorbing the spontaneous popular anger through a number of decisions, including the announcement of the employment of 50,000 young Omanis who were in need of work, changing a third of the members of the Council of Ministers, raising the minimum wage, promising to conduct elections, which took place in October 2011, promising to resolve problems associated with unemployment and corruption, and quickly deciding to form a constitutional committee tasked with overseeing the expansion of the legislative and administrative powers of the Omani Shura Council, which is composed of 84 members.

Oman was capable of facing the storm, and of regaining its balance and stability. Sultan Qabous Bin Saeed, who has ruled Oman since 1970, was able to overcome the repercussions of the Arab Spring with political tact, and with the least amount of losses and damages.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Arab Spring has left its mark on the Omani street, which is currently divided among several currents. The pro-government "renaissance" current believes that Oman has been experiencing an uninterrupted "Spring" since 1970, and is not in need of further reform. Then, there is the "economic" current, representing the traditional alliance between the businessmen and the military establishment that is responsible for administrative and financial corruption; this current has lost many of its positions and figures, but it still wagers on a quick return after the retreat of the Omani Spring. It also became clear that the "Islamic" conservative current has little momentum in the Omani street, and was incapable of exploiting the popular protests to assert its popularity. This was also the case of the so-called "revolutionary" current, which suddenly arose during the 2011 events and raised the slogan of a contractual constitution, but it became clear that this current does not enjoy the scale of popularity that it was thought to have. The last current, the "reformist" current, is characterized by elitism and does not express the beat of the Omani society; it enjoys little influence on the Omani street and has failed to offer credible centrist propositions.

However, there are pressing and rightful popular demands that cannot be ignored in Bahrain, Oman, and the other Arab Gulf states though it has become clear that the Gulf situation does not allow the raising of revolutionary slogans. The GCC countries will act as a group if they feel existential threats emanating from abroad or from within; the

¹⁸ It should be noted that Sultan Qabous is the Sultan of Oman and the prime minister, while also holding the posts of minister of defense, minister of foreign affairs, and minister of finance, in addition to numerous military and judicial posts since 1971.

experience of Bahrain has proven that these states have taken a strategic decision to collectively confront the repercussions of the Arab Spring at any cost, including military intervention. The experience of Bahrain has revealed the existence of Gulf “red lines” that cannot be crossed, headed by the question of the persistence of the ruling dynasties that enjoy a centuries-old hereditary legitimacy.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents a special Gulf case, and the Arab Gulf’s center of gravity, demographically and economically, due to the Kingdom’s size, stature, resources, and geopolitical role, as well as its suspended social questions that await decision. The Arab Spring has revealed that Saudi Arabia has a cluster of points of strength and weakness at the same time.¹⁹ Most importantly, Saudi Arabia was capable of achieving an important political victory in the battle for Bahrain, which was, in its essence, a battle for Saudi Arabia. The battle for Bahrain raged 25 kilometers away from Saudi shores, and was fateful and strategic for Riyadh on more than one level, including the preservation of the Royal Family and preventing the Kingdom from being turned into a constitutional monarchy; the stakes were also high regarding the confrontation with Iran which has historic and sovereign claims over Bahrain, and has attempted to involve itself in the domestic Bahraini scene.

The third, unexpected, confrontation came with the United States, which was rejecting the government’s employment of violence, and which sympathized, in principle, with the demand of the opposition calling for the enactment of democratic reforms and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Bahrain. Thus, Saudi Arabia achieved in Bahrain a triple victory against America and Iran, and against the spread of the Arab

¹⁹ For further details on the repercussions of the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia, see: Muhammad Bin Snaitan, “The repercussions of the Arab movements for democracy on the Saudi streets,” *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, Issue 390, August 2011.

Spring not only in Bahrain, but throughout the Arabian Gulf.²⁰ Saudi Arabia also waged an important battle on the domestic front to prevent the arrival of the contagion of the Arab Spring into the Saudi interior, overcoming the Saudi calls for “a day of rage” or “the Hunayn Revolution” on March 11, 2011, which failed to organize protest demonstrations demanding political reform. The failure of the call to demonstrate can be attributed to a number of factors, most notably fear and the anonymity of the party calling for the day of rage, in addition to the swift Royal grants announced by the Office of the King on February 18, 2011, amounting to USD 130 billion, including: 1) an increase in pay in the public sector, 2) a grant equaling two months of salary for all state employees, civil and military, 3) a two-month salary bonus for all students in public education, 4) a monthly salary disbursement for the unemployed, 5) the establishment of a minimum wage for Saudis working in the government sector, 6) the creation of 60,000 new military positions in the Ministry of Interior, 7) 500,000 housing units throughout Saudi Arabia, 8) an increase in the upper limit of housing loans to USD 133,000.

It appears that the Saudi monarch has decided to employ the financial reserve of the Kingdom, estimated at USD 450 billion, to absorb the internal pressures caused by the deteriorating living conditions of broad sections of the Saudi people; thus, the main motive behind these grants is to assert the ability of authority on Saudi Arabia to absorb the repercussions of the Arab Spring on Saudi society, delay the political reform demanded by the Saudi elite, and abort any spontaneous movement carrying the slogan “the people want to bring down the regime”.

Nevertheless, despite the swift grants and the victories pointing to the government’s strength at home and abroad, Saudi Arabia is exposed, unlike the smaller Gulf states, to

²⁰ Among the ironies of the Arab Spring was the fact that Saudi Arabia, which intervened militarily to stop the march of the Arab Spring into Bahrain, is the same country that offered the most external support for the Arab people in Syria in its battle for freedom, which was demonstrated when it decided to recall its ambassador in Damascus in protest over the excessive use of violence by the Syrian regime, especially during the month of Ramadan. This Saudi stance reflects support for the Syrian people as much as it is related to the considerations of the balance of power in the region, where any loss for Iran signifies a strategic gain for Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, it became clear that, while Saudi Arabia is the largest force for persistence and tradition in the region, it is not necessarily an actor that opposes Arab revolutions calling for freedom. For further information on the Saudi role and the debate on whether Riyadh is leading a counter-movement against the Arab Spring, see: Gause, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Haykel, 2011; and

Toby Jones, “Saudi Arabia’s Regional reaction”, *The Nation*, August 24, 2011.

the contagion of the winds of change due to its many crises, including the rise in corruption, unemployment, poverty, demographic growth, the autarchy of the legal system, the monopoly of power, the absence of participation, women's issues,²¹ and the aging of the political leadership coupled with raging disputes within the ruling family – and all these factors are compounded by the reality that half the population in Saudi Arabia is under 23 years of age. The corruption that pervades the state and society, and has reached extreme levels,²² cannot be tolerated anymore, and the same goes for the unprecedented monopoly of the ruling family over power at a time when bureaucratic atrophy has reached such levels that the Kingdom has become both incapable of political and administrative reform, and unwilling to pursue it. The absence of a horizon for reform was one of the main causes of the Arab Spring, and remains a fertile soil for revolutions and the potential for protests in Saudi Arabia.²³ The factors of weakness are theoretically numerous in the Saudi interior, and all the causes for revolution exist in Saudi Arabia as they did in Egypt and the other Arab states, awaiting the fuse that usually comes unexpectedly, which was perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the Arab Spring.²⁴ Thus, despite the apparent political stability, the situation in Saudi Arabia remains always on the brink.²⁵

²¹ In Saudi, a woman's path to obtaining her rights in a misogynistic, tribal, and conservative Saudi society is extremely arduous. During 2011, women in Saudi Arabia obtained a number of modest concessions, crowning the struggle of Saudi women and their battle for freedom. The Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia is one of the woman. However, the question of women in Saudi Arabia is complex and should involve more than the demand to drive cars, which is often brought up in the media and has been turned into a controversial social issue between the conservative religious current and the liberal current, which is pushing for the opening of society. Moreover, the female voices calling for reform were the loudest during this phase, with the boldest voices coming from Saudi women living outside Saudi Arabia, such as Dr. Madawi al-Rasheed, Dr. May al-Yamani, Dr. Hatun al-Fasi, and, most recently, Princess Basma Bint Saud Bin Abd al-Aziz. See: Cahal Milmo, "Saudi princess joins clamor for deep reform," *Independent News Services*, January 3, 2012. For a woman's perspective on the issue, see: al-Nafjan, 2011.

²² For additional information on corruption in Saudi Arabia, see the controversial Tweets of Mujtahid (@mujtahidd) on Twitter, which began in November 2011 regarding the files of corruption at the highest levels. Some have likened the Tweets of Mujtahid to a Saudi iteration of Wikileaks.

²³ Badr al-Ibrahim, "The Saudi Spring in 2011," *al-Maqal*, October 31, 2011.

²⁴ Statistics show that the average income per capita in Saudi Arabia has reached USD 16,000 in 2011, which is less than the figure in both Bahrain and Oman. Saudi Arabia, the largest oil exporter in the world, ranks 75th, globally, in terms of human development, coming in below Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, which occupy, respectively, the 71st, 44th, 43rd, 40th, and 30th positions. The poverty rate in the Kingdom has reached 22 percent, with unemployment officially at 10.5 percent; the percentage of Saudi citizens who are indebted to banks has reached 89 percent, while divorce rates in Saudi society have exceeded 40 percent. On the GCC and Arab levels,

It would be difficult to classify Saudi Arabia among the winners, or the losers, of the Arab Spring.²⁶ The future of reform in Saudi Arabia is closely linked to the persistence of the reformist King Abdullah Bin Abd al-Aziz, who is 87 years of age,²⁷ on the throne. King Abdullah has enacted a number of reformist decisions, the most recent of which being the granting of women the right to vote, run as candidates, and serve as members of the Shura Council. King Abdullah enjoys high popularity and legitimacy, making him the safety valve of the difficult situation in Saudi Arabia.²⁸

If Bahrain was the weakest link in the GCC, Qatar is the GCC's strongest; and if Bahrain was the biggest loser, then Qatar is the biggest winner from the Arab Spring, politically,

Saudi Arabia comes at the bottom of the pile in terms of liberties and human rights, especially regarding women's rights and their equality in society; human rights organizations indicate the existence of 30,000 political prisoners in Saudi Arabia, and that the number of complaints filed against the State Security Intelligence had exceeded 15,000 complaints by 2011. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia came in 50th globally on the corruption index, with the United Arab Emirates garnering the best classification on the Arab and Gulf levels. It should be noted that the reformist movement in Saudi Arabia began to revitalize since the assumption of King Abdullah in 2005, with 15 written petitions presented by Islamic and liberal intellectuals all demanding political reform, the expansion of the powers of the Shura Council, the separation of powers, the reform of the judicial body, the respect of political and civic rights, and the issuance of more rights for women, with some petitions going as far as calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Saudi Arabia. See: Lee Nolan, "Managing reform: Saudi Arabia and the umbrella of political liberation," *Madarat*, June 2011.

²⁵ Dr. Muhammad Bin Sunaitan says: "Nothing should reassure us that we are isolated from the events in the region, not much credence should be given to the apparent calm that is a façade for the extensive security deployment. However, no signs of hope have emerged to the effect that the Gulf regimes, with Saudi Arabia being the largest of them, have understood their populations and have begun to assimilate what is occurring around them; they remain in a coma after having been shocked by the stark reality around them. There is no lifeline that can save these regimes from what is taking place in the Arab countries, and nobody can predict what the future holds, except [when these regimes begin to] garner the approval of the populations, and to embark on real reform to its fullest extent." Muhammad Bin Snaitan, "The repercussions of the Arab movements for democracy on the Saudi streets," *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, Issue 390, August 2011, p. 124.

²⁶ For a more expansive discussion on the effects of the Arab Spring on intellectual and political currents, see: Muhammad Jazairi, "The Arab Spring and the autumn of currents in Saudi Arabia," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 6, 2012.

²⁷ A US Department of State document revealed as part of the Wikileaks incident claims that the King is 93-years-old.

²⁸ Abdulaziz Saqer, "Reforms Arab monarchies cannot avoid," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2011. There are concerns, however, that the march of reform in Saudi Arabia could experience a setback with Prince Nayif Bin Abd al-Aziz, who belongs to the conservative wing of the Saudi royal family, officially becoming the Crown Prince.

diplomatically, and in the media – thus far. Qatar’s presence in Arab affairs has ballooned, with the small state appearing everywhere, at every occasion, and wherever news and events are made. In some cases, Qatar became a maker of the news and an object of interest rivaling the Arab Spring itself. Qatar, which is diminutive in size and in population,²⁹ acts as a political, media, and diplomatic giant, and serves as a model that states are measured by their actions and not their size.³⁰ Doha emerged not merely as the capital of a small Gulf state, but as a candidate to becoming the political capital of the entire Arab system, especially since Qatar’s reform policy began to act with confidence, boldness, and quick initiative, even going as far as practicing direct incitement against regimes and heads of states – as opposed to the neutral, prudent, and consociational behavior of the era preceding the Arab Spring.

It is clear that Qatar was as successful in its consociation policy as it appears to be with its current bold foreign policy. In both cases, Qatar mobilized its massive financial resources to assert its presence on regional and international levels. This influence is due to the fact that Qatar is the largest producer of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in the world, with a yearly income equaling Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues in 2011. Qatar controls the third largest natural gas reserves in the world, after Russia and Iran, with an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet – the equivalent of 14 percent of global natural gas reserves.³¹ Between 2003 and 2009, Qatar achieved a cumulative growth rate of 31.48 percent, the highest in the world. According to International Monetary Fund data, Qatar occupies the first rank in the world in terms of per capita income, USD 88,200 in 2012, ahead of Luxembourg’s. This figure is expected to reach USD 112,000 by 2016, twice the American average of USD 55,000, estimated for the same year.³² As for the Qatari sovereign fund, which was established in 2005, it has exceeded the USD 150 billion ceiling during the last five years, placing it among the ten largest sovereign portfolios in

²⁹ Qatar’s land area is 11,586 sq km, with a population of 1.6 million, including around 300,000 Qatari citizens, who represent 20 percent of the total population.

³⁰ Abdulaziz al-Khamis, “Imperial Qatar,” *Middle East Online*, May 23, 2011.

³¹ BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2011.

³² According to international data, Qatar is the 155th country in terms of population, 128th in terms of population density, 164th in terms of size, 33rd in human development, 59th in terms of total GDP, 2nd in terms of the average individual income, 41st in terms of the quality of life, 22nd in competitiveness, 22nd in transparency, 144th on the democratic scale, and 16th in terms of political stability.

the world;³³ Qatar also plans to spend USD 100 billion on infrastructure in preparation for the hosting of the Soccer World Cup 2022.

This massive wealth was employed by the 57-year-old Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani to achieve ambitious agendas at home and abroad. Internally, Qatar is undergoing comprehensive social transformations that have created a complete rupture with the recent past.³⁴ As for the foreign agenda, it stands more ambitious still, with the Qatari wealth employed to achieve a regional and international vision based on supporting the moment of Arab freedom and the Arab Spring everywhere. Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani was transformed from being the Sheikh of a newly-independent oil state, which is linked by deep strategic ties to the United States, and which was, until recently, classified among the conservative and reactionary Arab states by the revolutionary and Arabist discourse, into “the new Sheikh of Arab revolutionaries” – a fact that carries many indications regarding the novel Arab revolutionary scenery of 2011, as well as representing a sign of the rise of the “Arab Gulf moment” in contemporary Arab history.³⁵

Broadly speaking, the Qatari Spring was a media spring, with Al-Jazeera representing the depth of Qatar’s influence on the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring cannot be imagined without this channel, which was an effective weapon, even an important revolutionary weapon, in the hands of Qatar’s government and its Prince, as much as it was an effective weapon in the hands of the angry Arab street that was rejecting despotism and corruption, and rebelling against political stasis. Al-Jazeera took the side of the revolutions, performing a role of mobilization while covering the Arab revolutions; the channel itself became a controversial topic between enthusiastic supporters and angry detractors. Fifteen years after its first launch from Doha in November 1996, Al-Jazeera transformed from covering events to becoming the event, and from being a tool for the

³³ See the attest report and assessment published by the Sovereign Wealth Funds Institute, www.swfinstitute.org/fund-rankings/.

³⁴ During the month of September 2011, the Qatari government announced the increase of the salaries of employees in public departments by 60 percent, with military, including retirees, receiving a 120 percent increase. Official data shows that 80 percent of the Qatari workforce is employed by public-sector institutions. See:

Zamila Bunglawala, “Will Arab Spring Lead to more Democracy or more State Entrenchment,” *The Stuggers*, September 18, 2011.

³⁵ For a more expansive discussion on the concept of “the Arab Gulf moment in Arab history,” see: Abdulla, 2010).

transmission of news to becoming the news.³⁶ No television channel has previously interacted with the Arab street the way Al-Jazeera did, performing a central role in the success of the Tunisian Revolution, and contributing to the Egyptian Revolution achieving its first target – bringing down the regime of Hosni Mubarak.³⁷ Wherever you find Al-Jazeera, you find Qatar, a state that has surpassed itself and many other states that are larger in size, more populous, and has done so with a more pioneering history in determining the future of the Arab Homeland.³⁸ The irony lies in the fact that Al-Jazeera has taken the side of the Arab street and its demands, but refuses to embrace the demands of the GCC street, turning its cameras away from the social and political movement in Bahrain.³⁹

Aside from the discussion on Al-Jazeera's role, it is important not to underestimate the capacities of the small states in the current and future Arab system, especially as large Arab countries are embroiled in their internal crises and revolutions. Small and rich Arab states, such as Qatar and the Emirates, have young and ambitious political leaderships who desire to perform non-traditional leading roles on the Arab scene, and who have placed themselves in a leading position to determine the agendas of the phase following the Arab Revolution of 2011.⁴⁰

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is another point of strength in the GCC context, and is among the biggest winners and beneficiaries of the Arab Spring, especially in its economic dimension. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar were the only two Arab

³⁶ al-Deen, 2011.

³⁷ In his book *The Al-Jazeera Effect*, Philip Sep says that this channel is reshaping the Arab consciousness as well as the Arab reality (Philip Sep, *The Al-Jazeera Effect*, Doha, Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 2011, p. 12).

³⁸ Waddah Khanfar, Al-Jazeera's director of eight years who resigned his position in September 2011, stated, "Al-Jazeera has asserted Qatar's presence on the Arab and international levels, but the channel is not a tool in the hands of Qatar, nor does it serve Qatari foreign policy; once the channel becomes a propaganda channel for Qatar, Al-Jazeera as we know it will cease to exist." Haley Sweetland Edwards, "The Arab Spring and Qatar's role," *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2011.

³⁹ Hugh Miles, author of the first book on Al-Jazeera in the English language, says that the resignation of the channel Director Waddah Khanfar means that: "the time has come to rein in the forces of change that Al-Jazeera has helped unleash on the Arab scene, before they begin to turn against the Arab Gulf including Qatar." Hugh Miles, "Al-Jazeera Boss Steps Down: Strains with Qatar royals," *BBC Middle East*, October 1, 2011.

⁴⁰ Henderson, 2011, and Ackerman, 2011.

states that did not witness popular demonstrations and protests demanding reform, as happened in other Arab countries during the Arab Spring. This is the most important characteristic of the so-called "Gulf exception," which only came true in the UAE and Qatar. In these two states, the citizen is treated as veritable "royalty" due to the economic and social prosperity of these two wealthy states. The sole reformist demand in the UAE came in the form of a polite letter signed by 133 national figures, addressing the President of the Union, beseeching him to expand the authorities of the appointed National Federal Council, which has modest consultative attributions, and which does not befit the Emirates, which heads other Arab states in a large number of social, developmental, and technological domains.⁴¹ The reformist demands were modest; however, what bothered the Emirati security services in the letter was the concern that this attempt carried the germs of a political alliance between the Islamist and liberal currents. These security agencies believe that the Islamist current has an instrumentalist scheme to exploit the winds of change in the region by mobilizing the Emirati street and escalating the social movement, especially in peripheral regions, in order to undermine stability and, perhaps, overthrow the government in cooperation with figures from the liberal current. This Islamist-liberal coordination was not tolerable for the Emirati government in light of exaggerated security concerns toward the Islamist current in the region. Thus, the government moved on two levels to confront this "Islamist scheme," arresting an important symbol of the new liberal current and a human rights activist.⁴² Moreover, the managing boards of the Attorneys' Association, the Teachers' Association, and the Reform Association were all disbanded in Ras al-Khayma, all of which were associations perceived as being affiliated with the Islamist

⁴¹ The UAE is suffering from the problem of the widening gap between the rich Emirates and the less wealthy ones; the GDP per capita in Abu Dhabi is 45 times larger than that of Ras al-Khayma, while the unemployment rate in the northern Emirates has reached 21 percent, compared with 14 percent on the federal level in 2009. The northern Emirates are the most important points of weakness in the equation of security and stability in the UAE, and they represent a hefty security burden for the political capital Abu Dhabi. Thus, with the flaring of the Arab Spring, the federal government decided to quickly inject USD 2 billion in order to develop the infrastructure in these Emirates. Nevertheless, the UAE has registered the highest rates of satisfaction and optimism among the GCC states, according to a survey conducted by the Gallup Institute to measure public opinion in 2011. See: Claire Ferris-Lay, "UAE has Happiest Residents in the Gulf," *Arabian Business*, August 30, 2011.

⁴² Ahmad Mansour, the legal activist and author of the "Dialogue" blog and member of the consultative committee of the Human Rights Watch branch in the Middle East, in addition to four other activists who were arrested with charges ranging from insulting the Head of the State to disturbing security and stability. These activists are currently being tried.

current in the UAE.⁴³ It is noticeable that the Islamist current, despite its wide popularity, made no reaction to these measures, begrudgingly complying with these decisions.⁴⁴ The liberal current was too weak to act in order to prevent the arrest of its young figures. The government won this imbalanced confrontation. Aside from these incidents, the United Arab Emirates remained isolated from the winds of change,⁴⁵ conducting limiting elections in September 2011, in which 130,000 citizens participated to elect half the members of the Federal National Council, which is composed of 40 members.

On foreign affairs, UAE's diplomacy attempted to keep up with Qatari diplomacy, registering an active presence on the Arab and international scenes, and in several locations, especially the heated Libyan arena. However, unlike Qatar, the UAE did not have the same speed of initiative and ability to adapt to changes; in fact, the UAE diplomacy appeared hesitant in several instances, most prominently in Egypt. UAE wanted to find an honorable exit for Hosni Mubarak, who had an old personal and political friendship with the founding father, Sheikh Zayed, and other political leadership in the UAE, as well as other Gulf capitals, all of whom perceived him as the backbone of the front of moderation in the regime. The UAE's sympathies with Hosni Mubarak in his last days in office were misplaced, leading to a misunderstanding of the Emirati position by the revolutionary Egyptian street and the new Egyptian political elite, which caused political losses that the UAE is currently attempting to rectify through generous financial assistance. However, the UAE stood beside Qatar on the side of the righteous camp in Libya on the humanitarian, political, and military levels, coming out of the Libyan crisis with important political gains, including the assertion of the UAE's international presence.

Nevertheless, aside from politics and diplomatic action, the United Arab Emirates, and especially its financial and commercial capital Dubai, were capable of affirming their

⁴³ The elected members in these associations were placed by government appointees.

⁴⁴ The Reform Movement in the UAE, which is widely known for its associations with the Muslim Brotherhood, issued its reform statement on February 1, 2012, where it asserted that its path "is based on the appreciation and respect of the state leadership, and loyalty toward it and toward the Head of the State".

⁴⁵ If an Emirati Spring existed, this spring was mostly occurring in the virtual world and not the real one

"The UAE is quiet on the Street but Web reformers face heat," *Associate Press*, April 27, 2011.

regional role as a stable sanctuary for business and capital.⁴⁶ In fact, the Arab Spring was the equivalent of an unexpected godsend for the economy of Dubai, which was adversely affected by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis more than other regional economies. Subsequently, Dubai emerged as the prime economic beneficiary of the Arab Spring, employing its advanced infrastructure and regulatory framework, in addition to the climate of social freedoms and exceptional individualism, to attract international and global companies, investments, and capitals that were in flight from political flashpoints in the region and abroad. The Arab Spring came at the right time for this commercial city that is currently witnessing an economic revival, especially in real estate, which was one of the major weak points of the Dubai developmental model. This city is experiencing the Arab Spring economically, having regained its vitality and proven that it has no alternative as a safe haven for business and businessmen in the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁷

The Arab Spring contagion moved to Kuwait, which boasts the oldest constitutional and democratic experiment in the Arabian Gulf, and the state that also possesses the oldest sovereign wealth fund, currently estimated at USD 300 billion. Despite the facts that the social and political dynamic in Kuwait is rooted and uncontrolled, with a higher ceiling for freedoms than other countries in the region, and that mature political currents exist in Kuwait, in addition to a powerful opposition that has left its mark on the Kuwaiti political scene, some have used the Arab Spring to call for political reforms and to settle domestic political scores against the Prime Minister, by calling for the overthrow of his government, as well as the occurrence of a handful of popular protests in what became known as “the Safat and the Irada Squares,”⁴⁸ which demanded the establishment and creation of a constitutional monarchy, an elected government, and political parties. At one point, these protests violated red lines when some protesters broke into the Kuwaiti

⁴⁶ James Mullan, “In the Game of Regional Turmoil the Enduring Winner is Dubai,” *Middle Post*, February 24, 2011.

⁴⁷ Dubai also began to attract new Asian investment companies, especially Chinese investment firms that perceive Dubai as a safe entryway for their activities throughout the Middle East and Africa region. Simeon Kerr, “Dubai Draws New Breed of Investors,” *Gulf News*, September 24, 2011, p. 22.

⁴⁸ “Irada” and “Safat” squares are the Kuwaiti equivalent of Tahrir Square in Cairo, which became the most important symbol for the Egyptian Revolution and the Arab Spring in general. “Kuwait between Safat and Irada squares,” *al-Khaleej*, September 23, 2011, p. 2.

Parliament building to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the government of Sheikh Nasir Muhammad al-Sabah ignored these youthful and elitist protests, and adopted the policy of the dispensation of massive financial grants, including a package of financial incentives that included a direct monetary grant of 1,000 Kuwaiti Dinars (USD 3,600) for each Kuwaiti citizen and a generous subsidy for the food needs of each Kuwaiti family for an entire year. These measures were intended to stop the revolutionary tide,⁵⁰ however, the cabinet was not able to persist for long, eventually presenting its resignation to the Prince in November 2011, thus ending the “Nasirist era”⁵¹ in the tumultuous Kuwaiti political life. The sharp political debate continued in Kuwait during the Arab Spring, leading to the emergence of sectarian, tribal, and parliamentary entrenchments that have compounded the governmental and political paralysis, which have marked the period following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait 1990.⁵² In November 2011, parliamentary elections were held in Kuwait, leading to the election of a parliament with a large majority of opposition MPs. This result came to confirm the fact that Kuwait has experienced its Spring with its democratic style, which defers from other Arab Gulf countries. Generally speaking, Kuwait was not affected as deeply as Bahrain and Oman, and Kuwait was not as affected by the developments of 2011 as much as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. It could be said that Kuwait did not emerge with important gains or noticeable losses due to the Arab Spring.

Elements of Strength and Weakness in the Gulf Security Equation

Aside from the list of winners and losers and the points of strength and weakness in the Gulf context, the Arab Spring has revealed the existence of elements of strength and weakness in the Gulf security equation, especially regarding the priority of internal threats over regional threats to the security and stability of the Gulf. The Gulf Cooperation Council, as a regional organization, has largely benefitted from the Arab Spring, coming out stronger and asserting its influence in times of crisis. The GCC

⁴⁹ Kristin Smith Diwan, “Kuwait’s Constitutional Showdown,” *Middle East Channel*, November 17, 2011.

⁵⁰ As an example, this policy went as far as subsidizing chicken, at the rate of 14 chickens for each Kuwaiti family per month.

⁵¹ In reference to the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasir Muhammad al-Sabah.

⁵² Abdulla, *op. cit.*

organization was employed to strengthen common Gulf action in the Gulf region and in the greater Arab world. The member states have also grown to rely more on the GCC, especially considering military and security coordination; thinking and acting collectively are among the most prominent strong suits of the GCC states. The events of the Arab Spring have laid the groundwork for further cooperation and coordination. The strength of the Council was apparent when Desert Shield forces entered Bahrain, deciding the conflict in favor of the ruling family, even if momentarily. The GCC's military intervention in Bahrain was a spectacular act that sent multiple messages to internal and external parties, asserting that – from now on– the GCC countries are in possession of military capabilities that cannot be ignored.

The strict employment of military resources, without resorting to the traditional (American) sources of foreign aid was the most notable development in cooperative Gulf action. As such, the Arab Spring came to present a certificate of validity for the GCC in an essential, previously untested, domain. Politically speaking, Gulf diplomacy was employed in several cases recently, most notably in the conflict over power in Yemen. Gulf diplomacy was the only active outside party on the Yemeni scene, becoming able, with the support of the United Nations, to decide the conflict over power with the election of a new president for two years.⁵³ The invitation presented by the GCC leaders, during their consultative meeting in Riyadh in May 2011, to Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC reflects the increasing self-confidence, as well as the enactment of the notion of the expansion of the collective Gulf umbrella to include the other monarchist Arab regimes that are facing the winds of change. This Gulf initiative, which surprised everybody at home and abroad, came as a momentary, circumstantial, and spontaneous reaction, and the principle of inviting new members to the GCC was not carefully and attentively studied before the announcement of the initiative. Still, the initiative comes from a position of power, and not from a position of security and political weakness.

The objective of the initiative is to extend the GCC umbrella to include monarchist Arab regimes that may be in need of extra resources to confront the challenges of the Arab Spring. This invitation did not emanate from the need to seek additional security protection, but is a message to the effect that the Council is in possession of abilities

⁵³ Equally noticeable was the complete absence of the Arab League and Arab diplomacy, perhaps from the perspective that Yemeni affairs are purely Gulf affairs. Even US diplomacy, which attempted to support the GCC efforts, was also unsuccessful in resolving the political conflict in Yemen.

and resources that can be employed for the interest of hereditary states that are outside the GCC system – during critical and decisive stages. Then came the GCC summit of Riyadh in December 2011, announcing the shift from the formula of “Gulf cooperation” to the stage of the “Gulf Union,” along the lines of the “European Union,” a further sign of confidence in the Gulf cooperative project, in addition to future ambitions and the desire to benefit from the accumulation of 30 years of experience in Gulf cooperative action. The call to shift into a Gulf Union is not a circumstantial and momentary one, but is rather a long-term strategic option that sends a clear message saying that the project of Gulf cooperation has fully and irreversibly surpassed the phase of uncertainty to that of certainty. The GCC has come to stay, persist, and evolve with the evolution of Gulf and regional events.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the GCC is now in better shape and with a stronger presence, the Arab Spring has both positively and negatively affected the security dossier in the Gulf, revealing internal elements of weakness in the Gulf security equation.⁵⁴ On the one hand, the Arab Spring has revealed that the threat to internal security related to questions of social justice, the youth’s demands, the unbalanced demography, unemployment, democratic transition, and constitutional reform are all threats that are as significant as the external threat itself. The Arab Spring has also revealed that the fears of GCC countries regarding Iran are the only constant in Gulf strategic and security thinking. A fact that cannot be ignored is that Iran is a difficult neighbor for the small and large Gulf States, especially with Iran occasionally attempting to play on the weak points of the internal Gulf situation, position itself into domestic Gulf affairs, and achieve regional expansion whenever the opportunity presents itself. These concerns remained unchanged. Most importantly, the Arab Spring presented a rare opportunity for GCC states to deal with their internal security challenges with their own logic, away from Washington. The gulf military intervention in Bahrain happened absent of American approval and without Washington’s knowledge.⁵⁵ There were many risks of GCC military intervention, most notably the potential to inflame the Bahraini street that was already electrified by the Arab Spring, and the potential to enter into violent and protracted confrontations with the Bahraini street.

⁵⁴ Raghidah Dergham, “Security Concerns and Political Reform in the GCC,” on Twitter, May 21, 2011.

⁵⁵ Washington uses Manama, the capital of Bahrain, as the headquarters for the Central Commands of the American Fifth Fleet; there are voices in the US Congress calling for the withdrawal of the Fifth Fleet to another Gulf state, as a sign of Washington’s discomfort with the Bahraini government using violence to confront popular calls for reform.

More significantly, the risk existed of a direct military confrontation with Iran, which has its strategic, historical, and sectarian priorities in Bahrain. Despite the numerous risks, GCC decision makers ventured into Bahrain determined to abort the Bahraini Revolution because the price of non-intervention was too high. The nightmare of the fall of a ruling dynasty in a Gulf state could simply not be imagined, coupled with the nightmare of the emergence of a revolutionary republic in the midst of the hereditary Gulf monarchies. GCC military intervention was the only response to deal with this ever-present nightmare. The GCC countries were faced with the "worst-case scenario"; when the moment of truth came, these states had only a single recipe – collective military intervention in the face of internal and external threats.

The events of Bahrain came as an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to assert the relative independence of Gulf/Saudi decision from Washington. In an important and fateful moment, the Gulf decision separated from Washington's decision, and the Gulf vision deferred from the US vision regarding the central threat to internal security. All of this indicates that Riyadh and the other Gulf capitals are not acting with more independence from the American will, and behaving with more confidence in the face of the difficult Iranian neighbor. The US begrudgingly retreated, and Tehran was not capable of matching the Saudi/GCC military and political initiative in Bahrain. It was also affirmed, without doubt, that the security and stability of Bahrain is an inseparable part of the security and stability of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; furthermore, the security and stability of Bahrain is an inseparable part of the security and stability of all GCC states.

On a different front, the events of Bahrain have deepened the reality of sectarian entrenchment in the region, creating a new source of regional tension; the fear of sectarian polarization expanding outside of Bahrain is, today, one of the main elements of weakness of the security equation in the Arabian Gulf. Furthermore, the growth of the role of Islamist currents, the disintegration of the moderate front, the potential for the emergence of new political axes such as the "democratic Ankara/Cairo axis," the uncertainty of the post-revolution phase in Egypt and Syria, and the perennial instability of Yemen are all factors that increase to concern of GCC states regarding future instability in the region that can possibly lead to a new round of expansive military expenditure, which would, in itself, contribute to further instability in the region. However, despite concerns toward the future, the general tally of the Arab Spring remains positive for the Gulf security equation, having caused changes that largely

stand to benefit the GCC states, and have been shown to be in solidarity with each other, more independent from the American decision, and more confident in dealing with the Iranian neighbor. Iran has lost much in Bahrain and in various other fronts, most notably Syria, during the Arab Spring.⁵⁶

All of these tactical losses tend to favor GCC states, since the security equation and the balance of power between Iran and the GCC states is usually a zero-sum situation; every loss for Iran is a gain for the GCC states, and conversely, every political and diplomatic gain for Iran is, in the end, a loss for Gulf capitals. Strategic data indicates a slight shift in the balance of power in favor of the GCC states in 2011. The Iranian political retreat is minor, and the Saudi regional expansion is momentary and circumstantial, and shifts in the balance of power in the Gulf are relative and tactical, rather than structures and strategic. This signifies that the Arab Spring laid the ground for new domestic formulas in each country did not engender novel regional formulas. It may be premature to speak of a structure and an environment in the Arab gulf. The structure of the gulf security equation is stable, and characterized by its polarity, with its poles being Saudi Arabia, which is experiencing sharp domestic problems, and Iran, which is undergoing domestic issues that are even more acute. This bipolarity will remain in existence, until Iraq, the third pole, regains its vitality and stability. The security equation in the Arab Gulf tends to be tense, witnessing the climate of an active Cold War that became more heated during the Arab Spring between the Iranian and Saudi poles over the political and religious leadership of the region. Thus, no qualitative change in the balance of power took place in favor of any party or any specific current in the Arab Gulf.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The Arab region has experienced an exceptional revolutionary dynamic since the beginning of 2011; the forces of change, long repressed, were finally liberated from fear and suddenly emerged on the scene, shaking hereditary, republican Arab regimes, and knocking on the doors of Arab monarchies, including Gulf monarchies. However, if the Arab Homeland was living an exceptional revolutionary mood, the mainstream

⁵⁶ Farnaz Fassih, "Arab Spring Turns Up Heat on Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2011.

⁵⁷ The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 2011: The Annual Review of World Affairs*, 2011.

mood in the Gulf tends to be more reformist than revolutionary, and the forces of stability in the Gulf States are far stronger than the forces of change. There are no broad popular demands for change and nobody raises the slogan of “the people want to bring down the regime” in the Gulf. There is a very small minority that doubts the legitimacy of the Gulf’s monarchist regimes, which could transform, in the long run, into constitutional monarchies. The Gulf monarchies, which are hereditary, have shown an extreme ability to persist and confront the winds of change, and their ability to adapt with the events and challenges accompanying the Arab Spring must not be underestimated. These Gulf regimes are endowed with a host of relative advantages, including: oil wealth, historical legitimacy, Bedouin culture, demographic scarcity, extensive security services, patriarchal regimes, and the absence of an opposition and political parties, in addition to an important record of achievements in social, humanistic, and developmental fields.

According to the Human Development Report,⁵⁸ the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, are ranked first, second, third, fourth, and sixth in the Arab region, respectively. Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia are also the leading Arab countries in terms of the average income per capita. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, and Kuwait lead Arab countries according to the economic competitiveness index.⁵⁹ The UAE leads Arab states according to the index measuring the happiest countries, coming in globally at 25th.⁶⁰ Bahrain and Qatar are also among the most open and globalized countries in the Arab Homeland. The UAE was capable of leading other Arab states in the Networked Readiness Index, maintaining its global rank (23rd) over the last three years.⁶¹ These indexes and others have given the Gulf citizen the impression that they are “royal citizens,” distinguished from others in this moment of history, without the need to demand a change in their politically stable and economically prosperous situation.

⁵⁸ The United National Development Program, the Human Development Report 2010 (in Arabic), November 4, 2010, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_AR_Complete_reprint.pdf.

⁵⁹ Bank of America/Merrill Lynch Economic Competitiveness Index 2011.

⁶⁰ The United Nations, World Happiness Report 2012.

⁶¹ World Economic Forum, Networked Readiness Index (2009-2010-2011).

Historically, these countries faced even more difficult challenges during the Arab nationalist tide in the 1950s and the 1960s. These countries were equally capable of confronting the challenges of the Iranian Revolution during the 1980s and 1990s. These states believe that they are capable today of confronting the repercussions and challenges of the Arab Spring as well. After each crisis, hereditary monarchies in the Gulf grow stronger rather than weaker, adding years to their virtual age, and affirming their persistence against all odds and pessimistic outlooks, confirming the saying “the blow that does not kill me, makes me stronger”. On the other hand, the message of the Arab Spring is also extremely clear, and can be summed up thus: the Arab people are demanding political reform, liberty, dignity, democracy, reining in the state of the *mukhabarat*, and ending corruption, despotism, and the monopoly of power and wealth. These demands apply to all Arab States without exception, including the Arab Gulf states, albeit to varying degrees. Thus, democratic reform is strongly present in the Arab Gulf states, and cannot be ignored or postponed for long; these states cannot act as if they were an exception to the Arab revolutionary situation, or as if they were unconcerned with the legitimate demands for reform.⁶²

The Arab Gulf is an inseparable part of its Arab surrounding: they share one fate and one future. When the moment of freedom visits the Arab region, it visits the Gulf as well. No Arab state has immunity, regardless of its wealth. The Arab land is demanding freedom from the Arab Maghreb to the Arab Gulf, and this is the long-awaited moment of Arab freedom. Arab peoples, including the Arab people in the Gulf, are eager to practice freedom, participate in democracy, and receive their full civic and political rights. These populations merit political and constitutional reform, sooner rather than later.⁶³ The challenge currently facing Gulf States consists of assimilating the lesson of the Arab Spring, by making democracy into the utmost priority and affirming freedom in

⁶² Yusuf Khalifa al-Yusuf, “Gulf governments between reform and expiration,” *Dar al-Salam*, April 17, 2011, <http://www.darussalam.ae/content.asp?contentid=1816>.

⁶³ Limited mayoral and legislative elections took place in the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, at the end of the month of September 2011, representing small and hesitant steps on the path of democratic transition and political reform in the Arab Gulf states. Most noteworthy was the extremely weak rate of participation in these elections, reaching 39 percent in Saudi Arabia, 28 percent in the Emirates, and 18 percent in Bahrain. This raises questions regarding the sources of this electoral apathy: is it due to the lack of public interest in participation in political life? Or is it due to the modest legislative powers given to the parliamentary councils in these countries?

political life, even if through the moderate Gulf method, which conforms to Gulf specificities.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Frida Ghitis (2011) writes: “The moderate popular demands are confronted with noticeable flexibility in the hereditary Arab monarchies. However, if these governments fail to offer the required political concessions, and if the wave of democracy succeeds in the Arab region, the popular reformist demands in these countries will escalate in the future.”

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