

Report

The Gulf Union: Background, Timing and Implications

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The Arab states of the Gulf suffer from a triad of weaknesses and vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities relate to areas of conduct, diplomacy and development - and pose a threat to their interests. Saudi Arabia proposed the idea of a 'Gulf Union' as a way to address these vulnerabilities. However, there are many obstacles that impede establishing the Union in a way that allows it to achieve its goal of addressing its weaknesses, ensuring security, and protecting its interests. The most challenging obstacles are dealing with the self-interest that pervades the ruling elite in the Gulf, the identification of the citizens of the Gulf, and their relationship to the authorities. The next challenge is to then establish the requisite institutions that ensure continuity and stability of the Union.

In this paper, we will try to address three main themes:

- Background (with regards to the triad of vulnerabilities);
- timing (is it the right time to raise the idea of a union); and
- the implications of the Union (for the ruling elite, other spheres of authority, citizens and institutions of the Union.)

We feel it is important to contextualize this paper in the call by the Saudi king to the leaders of Gulf states, at the thirty-second summit of the GCC held in Riyadh on 19 December, 2011. It is important to realise that transition from a phase of cooperation to a phase of federation was neither impulsive nor spontaneous. Rather, the idea had been under consideration for some time. This can be seen by certain domestic and regional indicators, most notably the fact that Saudi Arabia sought to reach consensus with the UAE with regards the headquarters of the GCC's central bank. This came after the establishment of the bank was suspended due to a dispute between the two countries around who would host it. Resolving this matter was a prerequisite before any talk of a union could be put forward. Another indicator is Saudi Arabia's attempt to pave the way for a federation by addressing domestic political obstacles, and instituting certain reforms. These included issues such as elections - including to the Shura Council, and giving women more political rights. The objective would be to put Saudi Arabia on an equal footing with the other Gulf countries in this regard.

Background:

The talk of shifting from cooperation to a federation is necessary, particularly when we consider security issues for the Gulf states. With regards to security issues there are strengths and weaknesses, as well as threats and risks facing the six Gulf states. It is clear that the balance is not in their favour and the consensus is that a federation would strengthen their security situation. Thus, we have a case of vulnerability that is an impetus behind the creation of a federation, and this issue of vulnerability cannot be reduced to Iran or any other regional player. Rather Iran's role is simply to remind the Gulf states of their vulnerability. The Iranian threat is a symptom of their vulnerability and not a cause. If it were not for Iran, there would be other states who they would consider as threats to their security. If Iran were to neighbour Germany or France, they would not consider it a threat as the Gulf States currently do with Iran. Therefore, analysts and strategists in the Gulf should take note that Iran's involvement as a key player in the Gulf region is not due to its relations with neighbouring countries and movements within those countries, nor in its own power. Rather it lies within the Gulf state's own weaknesses. These same states that are trying to slam the door in Iran's face are the very same who smuggle keys to Iran from under doors.

The most serious and fatal weakness facing the Gulf states is how social structures and spaces are coded. Here, when we speak of codes we refer to non-time specific adoptions of official cultural institutions and practices relating to humans and the social and structural spaces they inhabit that allows knowledge to be liberated from the shackles of power. We talk of codes because the social sphere is based on a fundamental pillar of belonging, and the code is a way to gauge this sphere. In other words, code is the gauge

of belonging; thus, weakness of the latter reflects weakness of the former, and vice versa. When the code is weak, it indicates a dominance of groups and actors that are not representative of the community as a whole. Hence, it follows that the interests of these influential groups take priority at the expense of the interests of the nation. We will discuss this point in some detail.

It is clear that the issue of a sense of belonging affects all six Gulf states without exception. From this point we may say that the social sphere in the Gulf is threatened due to a stagnation and apathy around developing this sense of belonging. Belonging consists of identity and engagement. So, belonging is achieved when all identities are acknowledged; and then engaged with. Belonging is broader and more general than identity; belonging brings people together while identity potentially alienates them. Identity could not be evoked unless provoked by its opposite. The urban person is evoked by comparing him/her to the Bedouin. However, when meaningful engagement contains identity, it can transform into belonging. This is because meaningful engagement helps defuse discrimination. Thus code is the crucible that facilitates the mixing of identity and engagement in order to foster belonging.

The use of the terms identity and engagement refers to the identity of the citizen and their engagement in building their country. That is national decision-making, and the wealth of the place where they live. There is no nation without citizens, no citizen without belonging; thus, there is no nation without belonging. The code is not a major identity under which these conflicting minor identities are gathered. Unlike identity, code is that neutral space that is not based on the principle of opposition. It is a language understood by all parties; an abstract place for getting together, of overcoming partisanship and the status quo. In brief, code is the humanitarian space with a geographical border and temporal features.

The coding power of an entity refers to its ability to transcend sectarianism and elitism and open up a space that brings citizens together. It seems that there is a code crisis in the Gulf - a situation where nations are not actually for their citizens. There is partisanship, inflexibility and entrenchment, in addition to factional, regional, and elitist interests. The official discourse and institutions of state do not represent all sectors of society. Thus, the 'official identity' imposed on ordinary citizens does not represent them as much as it represents parties and key stakeholders.

The causes of vulnerability in these codes in the Gulf include: weak cultural accrual and historical continuity where continuity was fragmented in the interest of factional identities. Firstly, regional identities were imposed. This resulted in a severing of continuity and accrual; thus, this saw the code weakened. For example, the people of the Gulf are not represented in the educational curriculum. When searching the word 'Gulf' or the name of any of the six Gulf states, the results do not reflect the ancient cultures that inhabited the region or reflect its glorious history. This has impacted on how identity is understood and constructed and in turn this has influenced power and knowledge. This is because code strength is a sign of social harmony and cohesion, and is a guard against interventions and instability around security issues. In addition to its role in social harmony, code strength also forms an integral part of cultural accrual and historical continuity as both are important tools for interaction.

Most people – both within and outside the Gulf – do not know of Dilmun, Thamud, or Kindah - or any of the old, intermediate or late Arab Kingdoms that formed part of the current six Gulf countries. One of the oldest evidences of human settlement and development of political spaces in the Near East is the Akkadian empire in Mesopotamia, and the Kingdom of Dilmun (now Bahrain) that dates back to 3000 BC. Most people simply do not know about the Kingdom of Dilmun, or Thamud or any of the other kingdoms that once stood in the area of the Gulf and effectively contributed to political, intellectual, economic and technical development in human civilization. This rich history hardly receives any focus in the Gulf countries. The question is: why?

The reason is that other 'minor' identities dominated, and these other identities were subordinated to rather focus on serving the interests of these 'minor' identities. Therefore, cultural and historical pedigree of the Arabian Gulf is reduced to these minor identities. This has implications on diplomatic relations between the six nations of the Gulf, as well as on their political and cultural representation internally, regionally and internationally. For example, there is not a higher council for heritage and culture of the Gulf states that organises festivals and book fairs, or awards to highlight and promote the culture of the Arabian Gulf. Moreover, there is no sophisticated film industry to market this culture. Despite movies playing a central role in the cultural presence of a nation, cinema critics, however few, do not try to contribute to the development of local cinema. How could one imagine America without Hollywood or France without the annual Cannes Film Festival! The same applies to music, art, sculpture, photography, crafts and handicrafts.

Diplomatic vulnerability lies in the states' dependence on understanding diplomacy as it was fostered through old-style rules which were mostly abolished by the Arab Spring. The question is when will the Gulf states realise that the game has been altered significantly: key players have changed, and rules of old are no longer applicable? Further questions that need to be asked is whether politicians in the Gulf are waiting for another Mubarak to emerge; and If they realise that someone with an opposing ideology to Mubarak comes to power would they then realise things are no longer as they used to be? Or will this recognition happen too late? America of today is different to the 'unipolar' America of yesterday that was able to dictate what it wanted to whoever it wanted to. Its role, of course, is still influential and important, but there is no doubt that the margin of manoeuvre with the USA has increased and that is the fundamental point to be made. It appears that the Gulf states have not realised that America no longer occupies the position it once did and cooperating with blocs opposing America could indeed be beneficial to them.

Vulnerability around developmental issues in the Gulf states is an obvious fact. Attempts to enhance their security are inadequate and remain porous and incomplete. Rather they open new gaps to different players, such as Iran, to wedge in their influence. What is needed is for the states to consider their citizens as the cornerstone in the concept of security. As long as certain crucial aspects are ignored - such as political development and the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, equitable distribution of wealth, and a focus on human development - any effort to maintain security will remain incomplete, and rivals - whether regional or international - of the Gulf states will manoeuvre themselves through this opening.

Moreover, economic development will increase the strength of the Gulf, not only economically but in terms of security as well. An effective and productive economy does not only depend on natural resources, but also on citizens' participation in development, who would then also benefit directly from it. This enhances security. In this case, economic growth is not limited to the economy, but it also applies to that of social, cultural and political growth. This will provide a productive environment that facilitates a process of engagement and integration with the region and its interests. Thus, maintaining the interests of the Gulf states is an integral part of other stakeholders' interests; and conflicting interests indicates a gap in development that cannot be justified. There may be a conflict of interests, however, if it is only to a certain extent such as regional competition to tackle unemployment rates. This could then be a positive factor in the spheres of production and development. But when this conflict of interests becomes excessively competitive this is indicative of a problematic disparity and suggests a gap in development. For example, while there has been tremendous economic progress in Turkey, this has not been the case in the Gulf. This may lead to a significant disparity in interests between Turkey and the Gulf states. In addition, military development in the Gulf has been very slow, and is dependent on the major powers. Yes, it may be necessary to cooperate with the superpowers as an expedient solution, however the Gulf states should begin developing their own capacity in both the medium and long term. This needs to be a fundamental option.

When attempting to analyse the timing for a call for the Gulf Union, three elements come to mind:

- limited options;
- expansionist policies of some countries in the region; and
- the storms that erupted from the Arab Spring.

Many questions emerged after the White House announced its new military strategy. However, these questions had already been discussed amongst decision makers in the Middle East even before this announcement was made, particularly after the collapse of the global markets during the financial crisis, and when President Barack Obama took office. His arrival at the white House was an important turning point, particularly his announcement that the US would withdraw from several important regions in the Middle East, and adopt new diplomatic approaches to the issues on the region, most importantly the US' approach to the Iranian nuclear file.

In short, for various complex economic and political reasons, the US is moving towards a 'policy of coexistence' at the expense of its former policy of 'unipolarity'- or absolute domination. To do this there is a price to be paid at the expense of countries of the region. Consequently, the Gulf States become more vulnerable to Turkish, Iranian, Euro and American bargainings. Therefore, reliance on the US to provide an umbrella of security - nuclear or conventional - is no longer the same as it was. The US will continue to prevent any party from the exercising full control of the Gulf, for obvious strategic considerations, but it would not invest too great an effort to do so. This means that reaching understandings with the key players in the region is unavoidable. That said, there is a price for this which the Gulf states inevitably would pay for.

In the near future, it seems that there will be no quick and easy alternatives for the Gulf states. The six Gulf states feel compelled to do something, so the idea of the Gulf Union emerged. The aim of the Union is not to create complete self-reliance, but rather to compensate for the shortfall that results from the US' new strategy, and to fill the resulting void. If the Union's goal was not total self-reliance, even after some time, it would never be able to fill the void resulting from the partial decline of the US. The Union's goal should play a significant role in commitment to its citizens and facilitating a space for productive nations. The decline of the US coincided with the rise of regional and global competitive forces. As a result, these regional powers have vigorously attempted to expand economically and diplomatically. Of course this is done at the expense of the aspirations of the Gulf countries. These expansionist policies represent a serious threat, especially as they are accompanied with the development of military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. If peace is achieved between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the presence of Israel - being a prominent nuclear power - in the arena and diplomacy of the region will be inevitable. The Gulf states would then find themselves between three nuclear axes: Iran, if it succeeds in developing a nuclear bomb; Turkey, under the NATO nuclear umbrella; and Israel that has more than two hundred nuclear warheads.

These three powers will attempt to dominate the region both economically and diplomatically. The features of this scenario begin to emerge and as a result the necessity of a confederation between the Gulf states is more pressing than ever. However, this confederation would never be sufficient if it is limited to the ruling elites. Their people also need to unite behind it. The people of the Gulf would be the strongest security pillar facing these three powers. However, there is a price for this as the ruling elites would have to waiver some of their political and economic privileges.

Additionally most diplomatic endeavours by Gulf states over the past decades were swept away by the Arab Spring; important allies went from the scene and major regimes, that cooperated with the Gulf states, have collapsed. Change will inevitably come to the Gulf region. It's a matter of time before politicians in the Gulf are aware of

that. In this sense, the union may play a crucial role protecting the Gulf ruling elite and the citizens through all these changes, such as the Arab Spring and fierce regional competition. It is a novel but important possibility that the Union plays the role of mediator between the Gulf's ruling elite and their people. The Union could assist in reaching a consensus that meets the general demands of the two parties.

Implications

There are two levels of implications: internal and international.

Internally, the Union would establish a framework for a Gulf public space. Basically that would allow for what already exists but facilitate fluid boundaries. This will give space for the idea of sovereignty of the people from the ruling elites in each country, but will later link their sense of belonging to the Union. Citizen will then be redefined on the basis of sovereignty of the Union – and not necessarily the states that they live in. In other words, the question of legitimacy of authority and its relationship with the citizen will be raised again. The rights of citizens in Gulf states and their role must be defined. Hence, in order to ensure the stability and continuation of the Union and the relationship between institutions of the Union and the ruling elite in the countries of the Gulf, we need to start talking about the institutions that will oversee these complex authoritarian processes.

The ruling elite will be relegated from being the 'state' to an intermediate status between state and citizen. This is because the Union would hold the status of the state. There would be a large circle that is the 'Union', a medium circle representing the 'ruling elite', followed by small circle within these, of the 'citizen'. There are two new points here to be considered: putting all the citizens of the six Gulf states (represented by the small circle) into the big circle, that is 'the Union' will have direct and important implications around the concept of legitimacy. This new hierarchy will mark the beginning of a Gulf spring in a flavour and way completely different from the Arab Spring that will allow the Gulf to safely bypass this sensitive and historic stage- being beneficial for citizens and elites alike.

Some crucial questions that need to be raised around the Union are:

- What kind of union is needed?
- To what extent will the elites be ready to take forward its implementation?
- Will there be a type of division between the elites?
- How will the Union manage and deal with the wealth of each state? Will budgets remain separate?
- How will the union deal with differential development, security and law systems of each state?

These are critical questions and it will be an imperative to draw up and institute a federal constitution that deals with them and other questions. Otherwise, the Union will be a 'council for cooperation' under the name of 'union'.

It would be impossible to achieve the Gulf Union without establishing effective federal institutions. The most important one of them is the Federal Constitution of the Arabian Gulf.

The power of the Gulf Union would be concentrated in its ability to address the triad of vulnerabilities discussed at the beginning of this paper. This would not be achieved unless the method of movement, action and reaction becomes the federal approach. In other words, the Union must be a single entity closed to interference, which would be

able to avoid division (as is happening now) and rather present a unified position of the different states that make up the Gulf region. Otherwise each one of the six members of the Union will only become involved as dictated by their own self-interest. This would lead to inevitable breakdown.

Therefore unity of interests, and then unity of action and reaction, needs to serve as the cornerstone for the Union. This would not be possible without the establishment of union institutions -especially a federal constitution. There must be a mechanism of action and a reference for arbitration. The existence of a constitution will entail and necessitate the establishment of a Gulf parliament, high court, and an effective executive authority. Without the institutional aspect, the desired outcome will not be achieved. In that case, the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) will remain in place, but under a new name.

Adopting a federal constitution - after approval by the citizens of the Gulf states - will be the rescue ship that carries the Gulf ruling elite and citizens to the safe shores. This step would be both a creative step and an ingenious move to not only ensure security against regional competitors, but will also protect the Gulf states from the Arab spring and changes that could impact negatively on the region. Additionally, the Union will undoubtedly be accompanied by the emergence of Gulf civil society organisations. This would be a point of strength for the Union in helping it achieve its goals.

In an international context, the Gulf states represent more than half of national production from the Arab world. More than 30 million people hold citizenship from the six Gulf countries. This is a huge economic and human force. Being united in one framework will allow them to face the current challenges, i.e. promoting and developing their capabilities. This in itself constitutes a threat to regional and international competitors. Here, we should ask: How would the Gulf Union influence relationships with the US, Europe, Turkey, and Iran? What form of union would serve the interests of these four forces, and, how would each of these countries exert efforts to influence the shaping of the Union according to their own interests?

These pivotal questions must be examined. It is wise to convert the American retreat - a concern for the Gulf countries - into a source of strength. By this we mean a shifting from closed to open alliances.

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