

THE GULF MOMENT: ARAB RELATIONS SINCE 2011

Florence Gaub

Within only 4 years, the “Arab Spring” has turned into a regional power play. The regional landscape has shifted not once or twice but three times in a very short time frame. The first shock to the regional system occurred in 2011, when four decade-old regimes were removed; the second brought Islamism as a political force to the forefront, first in Tunisia and later Egypt and Libya; and the third saw the return of revisionist forces following the removal of Egypt’s President Mohamed Morsi from power, the power-sharing agreement in Tunisia, and the persistence of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. With every wave of change at the domestic level, the regional implications of the Arab Spring became more and more pronounced, and, by 2014, visible in military and diplomatic terms.

More emboldened in military terms, more ambitious in diplomatic terms, and less receptive to outside influence, the Arab state system is currently undergoing a reconfiguration unseen since its era of independence. The implosion of some, previously strong, regional actors (such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt) has given way to other players—all of which are now located in the Gulf. In terms of regional relations, the Arab world has therefore entered a Gulf moment, and is likely to remain in it for the time being.

The Arab Spring shook up a largely stale system, as it changed the leadership in states that used to play crucial roles in the system and paralyzed others in regional terms without actually achieving regime change. Libya, Syria, and Egypt, traditionally self-declared drivers of Arab politics, became objects rather than subjects of regional relations (just as Iraq has since 1991). Their eclipse empowered those states that saw no disruptive protests and were therefore still in a position to not only react to but also to shape the regional changes—mainly located in the Gulf.

As the region underwent three shocks, the Gulf states hedged their bets differently than they had in the very beginning—but they also sought to influence events actively to embolden their own positions. Qatar, which made itself an unequivocal supporter of all protests from the very beginning, conducted a consistent policy of interventionism in the years after the Arab Spring. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) moved between actively supporting regime change at the beginning while containing its most destabilizing effects, whereas Saudi Arabia developed an initially cautious but increasingly aggressive revisionist stance that was as consistent as Qatar’s—but both policies were ultimately on a collision course with each other.

Phase One: Out with the Old.

In Phase One (January to November 2011), the Arab Gulf States were the first ones to react collectively to the crises in Libya and Bahrain; it was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that internationalized the Libyan crisis by calling on the Arab League for action. On Qatari impulse, the Arab foreign ministers suspended Libyan League membership.

Within their own realm, the Gulf States sought to maintain stability; however, Saudi Arabia mustered the GCC to quell the Bahraini uprising, and promised \$20 billion not only to Bahrain, but also to Oman in order to support both governments’ efforts to deal with their protests. The GCC reached out to Morocco and Jordan, the only two Arab monarchies not located in the Gulf, and offered their support to prevent any efforts to topple the two regimes. Saudi Arabia also lent strong support to a brokered transition in neighboring Yemen, where an uprising had challenged President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime since early-2011.

Phase Two: In with the Islamists.

In Phase Two (December 2011 to July 2013), the Gulf States had to react to the new policy dimension of Islamism in power in both Tunisia and Egypt—with Qatar being supportive, Saudi Arabia openly hostile, and the UAE discreetly so. The elections to Tunisia’s constituent assembly produced a landslide victory for the Muslim Brotherhood’s Tunisian offshoot, Ennahda, with 37 percent of the votes. The Egyptian parliamentary elections saw an equally crushing victory for Islamist parties from different branches, while the large majority of votes went to the alliance led by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (37.5 percent of votes) and the Islamist Bloc led by the Salafi Nour Party (27.8 percent). In the summer of 2012, Muslim Brotherhood member Morsi was elected to Egypt’s Presidency with 51.7 percent of votes.

Egypt’s strongest regional ally in Phase Two was Qatar; not only in financial but also in political terms, Doha supported the Muslim Brotherhood in power with Qatar as the only Gulf state to do so. Egypt received a pledge of \$2 billion to support its flailing economy, and Qatar announced major investment projects in Egypt amounting to \$18 billion. Saudi Arabia and the UAE remained cool toward these new regimes without being openly hostile.

Phase Three: The Old System Strikes Back.

Phase Three began when the Egyptian armed forces decided to remove President Morsi from power on July 3, 2013. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait were particularly quick to endorse the new situation in Egypt (the only Arab state to condemn it was Tunisia). All three states pledged urgent aid packages to support Egypt: Kuwait, \$4 billion; Saudi Arabia, \$5 billion; and the UAE, \$2.9 billion, respectively.

But Qatar’s situation became more delicate; Egypt declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, a move Saudi Arabia and the UAE followed 3 months later. With this declaration, Qatar’s alliance with the Brotherhood was suddenly criminalized; shortly afterward, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha, accusing Qatar of interference in the affairs of other states. Doha finally had to give in and requested the representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood to leave, opening the way for reconciliation with Qatar’s three neighbors. The Riyadh Agreement, which lays the groundwork for reconciliation, aligns the foreign policy of the Gulf States with one another.

The regional sea change had a profound impact on Tunisia’s Islamists in power. Amid fears of an Egyptian scenario and increasingly radical Salafists, Ennahda agreed to a technocratic government and the accelerated adoption of a new constitution.

The regional geopolitical changes that were set in motion in Tunisia in late-2010 have therefore culminated in a powerful pushback by those powers, which feel threatened by Islamism as an electoral force. More importantly, the rift among the Gulf States when it comes to the implications of 2011 are being felt across the region. The antagonism between Islamist forces and Qatar on the one hand, and reactionary forces, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, on the other, has had ripple effects that can be felt in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt.

The driving force behind inter-Arab relations has therefore relocated from Cairo, where it was situated for the better part of the 20th century, to the Gulf.

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute’s homepage at www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via email at SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College.”



This Publication



SSI Website



USAWC Website