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THE RELATIONS OF THE GULF STATES

# Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed 35 years ago and for most of this period it has been embroiled in diplomatic issues, both internally and in the region. These issues proved an advantage in its creation, but have distracted and become drivers for the GCC to restructure to achieve its prime objective of unity. For its many achievements, the future of the GCC as an organisation is uncertain. The member states are also sensitive to international relationships and ongoing regional developments in this regard. In response to the potential end of the hydrocarbon era and climate change mitigation measures, the economies within the GCC are diversifying, which may further push the required change in the structure of the GCC, as non-oil trading and non-military based relationships develop. This paper provides an overview of the GCC’s 35 year history and summarises the potential next steps.

# The creation of a unified Gulf

The GCC is a geopolitical and economic group representing six member states, (namely: Saudi Arabia; Qatar; Bahrain; Kuwait; Oman; and the United Arab Emirates) with a combined population of almost 50 million[[1]](#footnote-1) who collectively hold the largest oil and second largest gas proven reserves globally[[2]](#footnote-2). The GCC was formed in 1981, when the Iran-Iraq war provided an opportunity to exclude both countries from the cooperation.

A purported precursor to the GCC was the formation of the United Arab Emirates a decade earlier in 1971, however an important difference is the instrumental involvement of external actors in the United Arab Emirates formation, specifically the British Foreign Office and Iranian interests. The United Arab Emirates was intended to be a grouping of nine states including Qatar and Bahrain[[3]](#footnote-3), however territorial disputes and historical rifts meant their eventual withdrawal from discussions.

Prior to its formation, three divergent models were put forward for the GCC.[[4]](#footnote-4) Kuwait called for the GCC to be established per the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) focus on cooperation in economy and culture, and the creation of a neutral security zone. Whereas Oman called for the establishment of military ties with the US to include joint control of marine waters in the Strait of Hormuz. The third model proposed by Saudi Arabia, called for the cooperation and coordination of the GCC countries to achieve internal security. It is interesting that according to Legrenzi[[5]](#footnote-5), Kuwait sought approval from the Soviet Union prior to the formation of the GCC, being the only state to have such a relationship at the time. The United States had already forged relationships with the other member states and Legrenzi notes that the GCC was intended to “steer a neutral course between the two superpowers”.

# The GCC Charter

The GCC Charter[[6]](#footnote-6) does not name its member states in Article 5 and instead refers to them as “the six states that participated in the Foreign Ministers’ meeting held in Riyadh on 4 February 1981” and in the preamble, as a grouping of states with “ties of special relations, common characteristics and similar systems”. It is assumed that this wording was used to ensure that other nearby countries were excluded from becoming GCC members, such as Yemen which is also situated on the Arabian Peninsula.

Whilst a key driver for the formation of the GCC was to unify internal and external security operations against outside threats (notably Iran and Iraq, and the Soviet presence in Afghanistan at the time the Charter was drafted), specific mention of security is omitted from Article 4, which names the areas of cooperation as: “Economic and financial affairs; Commerce, customs and communications; and Education and culture”. Prior to and since 1981 external military resources have played an important protection role, notably the United States (for example, Bahrain is currently home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet[[7]](#footnote-7) which is responsible for all naval force operations in the Gulf, with 5,000 – 15,000 US personnel in-country, depending on deployment requirements).

The GCC does not have enough resources to manage security concerns on its own, and has not formally partnered with other Arab countries to avoid a regime coup. My understanding is that whilst the Bahrain government, for example, employs Jordanian nationals for internal security, they are a minority in the workforce and the majority of employees are Bahraini nationals. When Bahrain experienced a major uprising in February 2011, the US-backed Saudi National Army was invited to enter Bahrain temporarily to help to restore a form of domestic stability. This ad hoc system of peacekeeping is prevalent and it is unlikely that security will become formalised in the Charter because of its contentious nature between member states and the rest of the Arab region, and the ‘successful’ involvement of external actors, and the longevity of such relationships. This structure also means that bilateral agreements are in place for defence, rather than a multilateral arrangement which it is assumed that the US would prefer. Legrenzi notes “There is no strategic consensus on who the GCC should guard against.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Under the Charter, voting must be unanimous unless it is deemed a procedural matter, where a majority vote is permitted. The presidency of the highest authority of the GCC, the Supreme Council, is rotated on an alphabetical name basis of each state. However the term of the presidency is not specified (in the English version).

Article 10 sets out the ability to convene a Commission for the Settlement of Disputes in situations when there is disagreement on the interpretation of the Charter between member states and to diffuse disputes between borders, however the Commission has not been constituted to date. **Meditation** of border disputes has been mainly through bilateral negotiations. The GCC itself had a major issue in 2014 due to Qatar’s alleged support of the Muslim Brotherhood, which resulted in the recall of member state **envoys** from Doha by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates for a period of time. More recently collective support for a member state’s position in the region has been evidenced: in regard to the Saudi-Arabia –Iran dispute over the execution of cleric Nimr Al Nimr in December 2015; and Saudi Arabia’s withdrawal of aid to Lebanon due to uncertainty over subversive Hezbollah interests benefiting from such aid in February 2016. In both instances **envoys** were recalled, first by Saudi Arabia, closely followed by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar; citizens were also recalled to home countries as tensions escalated, and direct flights were halted. In a further development and in an unprecedented move, the GCC has declared that Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation[[9]](#footnote-9).

Under Article 17 representatives of the GCC including employees “shall enjoy the **diplomatic privileges and immunities** [emphasis added] established for similar organizations”. Registered copies of the Charter have been submitted to the Arab League and the United Nations per the requirement of Article 22.

# GCC achievements

Legrenzi states that the GCC is the “most resilient sub-regional organization in the Arab world”[[10]](#footnote-10). ‘Effective’ might be a better term in regard to its achievements, as the United Arab Emirates has existed for a longer period, and remains intact and operational. The oldest pan-Arab organisation is the 22 member state Arab League (formerly the League of Arab States) which was founded in 1945, however it has not enjoyed the implementation of much of its charter[[11]](#footnote-11). Perhaps the GCC has endured because of the **interdependencies** and autonomy in regard to national policies of its members. An insightful quote into the workings of the GCC from a previous Director General: “Rules are there to serve a purpose. If a particular purpose is better served by ignoring the rules [of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)] they will be ignored. GCC Secretary General Abdullah Bishara”[[12]](#footnote-12).

Legrenzi notes the “close personal relationship … [of] the leaders of the six GCC states”[[13]](#footnote-13) and numerous sub-regional and international meetings have been held in a number of key areas including security, energy, infrastructure, environment, where heads of state or ministers discuss collaboration between their “shaikhly regimes”. Per its initial objectives, the GCC **ratified** the Unified Economic Agreement in 1981[[14]](#footnote-14), established the Peninsula Shield Force[[15]](#footnote-15) (in private described as a symbolic combined military force) in 1982; also in 1982, founded and capitalised the Gulf Investment Corporation (for joint development); and set the foundation for the GCC Customs Union in 2003 (free trade area with a common external tariff) which moved to full implementation in January 2015[[16]](#footnote-16).

The Customs Union implementation suffered major delays in part due to disagreements between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the tariff level given the different respective trade strategies (Saudi Arabia has heavily subsidized infant industries whereas the United Arab Emirates did not want to jeopardize Dubai’s importance as a commercial and transhipment hub). The delays have proved costly for the GCC and also raised concerns with external actors such as the European Union who have predicated a free trade agreement with the GCC upon the implementation of the Gulf Customs Union[[17]](#footnote-17). As a result, several **bilateral** agreements were entered into by member states and international trading partners, which presumably are not on as attractive a basis as would have been achieved under a GCC trade agreement.

The GCC has ensured its requirements for critical infrastructure are met, in 2011 a GCC power grid was completed, a $1.4 billion landmark project[[18]](#footnote-18) agreed to and funded by the GCC, to provide back-up power during an outage. There have been many bilateral trades through the grid and discussions are underway to form a common power market, however there are both structural and technical issues which will need to be addressed[[19]](#footnote-19). A $10.5 billion transnational water grid (a supply backup system) is being discussed, as part of a unified water strategy for the GCC. To ease congestion on roads and aviation, and to provide an alternative transport option for people and goods, a $19 billion 2,116 km GCC rail network is underway, which is planned to begin operating in 2017[[20]](#footnote-20). This is a greenfield project as no rail system is currently in operation in any of the member states, aside from a metro system in Dubai.

Whilst each of the GCC member states has autonomy, a strategic move to remove subsidies for electricity, water and petrol around the same time period (late 2015 to early 2016) has minimised any reactionary disturbances from citizens to domestic stability. GCC citizens enjoy a tax free jurisdiction however discussions have been held on the introduction of a consumer tax (a value-added tax) which is proposed to be adopted across the GCC simultaneously, and the tax would be applied at the same rate in each member state[[21]](#footnote-21). A single GCC currency was announced in 2013[[22]](#footnote-22) however to date this has not been implemented. This action may be hampered by more recent discussions over the appropriateness of pegging the currency to the US dollar (as is the current practice in most member states) compared to a peg to a basket of currencies[[23]](#footnote-23).

Legrenzi states that the “GCC has proved to be quite a useful forum for the six member states to debate and formulate common diplomatic positions”[[24]](#footnote-24). The GCC itself has entered into eight **treaties**[[25]](#footnote-25) across its 30 year existence, but only two of these agreements are in force: a cooperation agreement with the European Union which came into force in 1990; and a free trade agreement with Singapore which came into force in 2013.

The member states are well endowed with foreign embassies, however on face value, there seems to be less **reciprocity,** particularly from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as shown in Table 1.

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| **Table 1[[26]](#footnote-26): A comparison of foreign embassies in the GCC and abroad** |
| **Member state** | **Foreign embassies** | **Embassies abroad** |
| Bahrain | 33 | 25 |
| Oman | 35 | 33 |
| Kuwait | 69 | 56 |
| United Arab Emirates | 73 | 47 |
| Saudi Arabia | 83 | 47 |

Given their close geographic proximity which lessens travel time between each state, the dominance of the fossil fuel industry, and level of integration of the member states, it is surprising that so many nations bear the expense of a **resident embassy** in each member state of the GCC. Should the GCC restructure into a Gulf Union (per the next section of this paper), it will be interesting to see if this impacts on **representation** and also engagement on international treaties, per the European Union’s supplement to member state embassies through “missions under the direction of the European External Action Service”[[27]](#footnote-27).

The Environment is not a specified field for collaboration under Article 4 of the Charter, presumably to ensure that each member state has full autonomy in this area and respecting the heterogeneity of the group in this area (in regard to natural resources, location, industries and population and each state’s long term economic vision). Each of the GCC countries is a party to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) and as such submitted Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs)[[28]](#footnote-28) for national greenhouse gas emission reductions prior to COP21 in Paris in December 2015, though an argument could be made in regard to the low level of ambition outlined. In the weeks leading up to COP21, the GCC met to agree a common negotiating position even though the GCC itself is not a party to the UNFCCC, unlike the European Union.

Similar to other regions or jurisdictions, **symbolism and rhetorical discourse** play an important role, “the venue of a particular meeting or the arrangement of the national flags, may hold important symbolic meaning for both constituents and the outside world”[[29]](#footnote-29). The GCC has had some success in the presentation of a unified view to external actors. For analysis and reporting purposes on the Middle East, a distinction is often made between the GCC and geographic sub-regional groups such as the Levant countries (which include Iraq, Jordan and Syria) and North Africa (which include Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Libya), which do not have a formalised structure. Gulf interests are mentioned rather than wider Arab interests in various discourse internally and outside the Middle East, however the “rhetoric of integration and the actual results achieved by the organization”[[30]](#footnote-30) in many instances are presentational rather than functional, given the structural limitations of the GCC.

Legrenzi makes the point that a transnational civic society operates across the GCC states, and I consider it is much wider given the movement of citizens across the region for employment, education or settlement. From the sheikhs to the ordinary citizen, the families (which can be very large) are often transnational with marriages between Arab nationalities commonplace, which further strengthens the bonds between nations. The GCC also operates as a form of Schengen with free movement across the GCC for its citizens since 1 March 1983, when visa requirements were removed[[31]](#footnote-31). However familial ties also create a key issue as Legrenzi reasons in regard to the GCC Secretariat’s weak powers on security “the plotter in one country could well be the relative of the ruler of another country”[[32]](#footnote-32).

# The next phase of the GCC, a Gulf Union?

In February 2015 the Gulf Development Forum (a group formed in 1980 comprising professionals and academics) discussed the future of the GCC and the meeting materials were published as a report[[33]](#footnote-33). The February meeting report provides a useful summary of relatively recent discussions on the proposed establishment of an intergovernmental Gulf Union, akin to the European Union. The report states that whilst the GCC has made some achievements over the past three decades, it has moved slowly, and not at a pace (or structure given there is no mechanism for the Secretariat General to enforce the implementation of various treaties) that is commensurate with today’s issues. Key failings were cited as the lack of a forming a standalone military force or creating a single common market, and continued political instability in the member states. Without **supranational** powers, the Supreme Council cannot act effectively and this is a “major stumbling block”. To this end a proposal was put forward in 2011 by Saudi Arabia to create a Gulf Union (some consider prompted by the uprising in Bahrain in February 2011), which was then explored by a committee selected by the GCC who reported its findings in February 2012. The initial findings were discussed and further meetings were held during 2012, 2013 and 2014.

Oman and Saudi Arabia hold opposite views, with Oman stating its intention to withdraw from the GCC if plans for the Gulf Union materialise (which would significantly weaken the integration that has been achieved so far), whereas Saudi Arabia initiated the discussions on the Gulf Union, which was also referred to as the ‘Saudi project’ in the report. Concerns were raised in a number of areas, such as:

* the retention of autonomy by member states under a “pooled sovereignty” preferring the status quo of **Westphalian sovereignty**;
* the potential to remove “social freedoms such as the closure of cinemas, and curbing of hotel and tourism activities” if the Gulf Union required its members to align;
* key differences in the political systems of prospective members;
* the increased burden of such a union (presumably from a financial and resourcing perspective);
* a possible “weakening in national identities and heritage decline” (the larger states, Saudi Arabia and Oman, “melting the identity” of the remaining smaller states who could become marginalised); and
* the Gulf Union might be viewed negatively by citizens, resulting in renewed domestic instability.

Rather counterintuitively the failures of the GCC were also cited as reasons not to form the Gulf Union, a lack of readiness on the part of the member states who need to demonstrate commitment by achieving the ambitions of the GCC first (ignoring the fundamental issue that its structure in many ways prevents this, hence the call for the Gulf Union to be established). A further counterargument to the Gulf Union is that none of the member states have lost their sovereignty during the existence of the GCC (however this hinges on continued external military support for it to continue to hold, as there is a possibility that the US may focus their military attention on East Asia following the withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan; and the lifting of Iran’s sanctions following the nuclear program deal).

Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain were cited as being keen to give approval to the implementation of the Gulf Union, and to forego the establishment of an interim committee to determine where the GCC had failed and the causes. It is interesting that enhanced external diplomatic or trading relations were not mentioned as drivers or possible outcomes from the proposed Gulf Union. Presumably these areas would continue to be managed on a bilateral basis, or were not seen as material benefits in the preliminary discussions. The Gulf Union was apparently open to wider Arab membership, with Jordan and Morocco involved in some discussions on the possibility of joining.

Aside from the concerns already mentioned and not apparently adequately analysed in the preliminary discussions, media scrutiny in the divergence of the member states on this issue, was cited as a key reason the discussions were concluded with no decision being taken in 2014. It was felt that the publicity on the differences could harm support for the GCC itself. The Gulf Union might also be perceived as a threat from the wider region and raise security issues, particularly in light of the outbreaks of instability in Egypt, Yemen and Syria, and ongoing conflict in Libya since 2012. The League of Arab States censured Iran’s attempt to halt momentum on the Gulf Union proposal in 2012 for provoking tensions through “a media campaign against Bahrain for political and military union between Gulf Arab states”[[34]](#footnote-34). It is quite possible that meetings are continuing to take place but behind closed doors until a decision can be made public, and therefore **public diplomacy** has been curtailed for the moment.

I consider Saudi Arabia’s apparent lack of procedure in first raising the idea of the Gulf Union in 2011 might also have been its undoing (the **preparatory phase**[[35]](#footnote-35)). At the first meeting, other member states were surprised by the proposal, which suggests that little to no **side diplomacy** was conducted by Saudi Arabia, nor any **intelligence gathering** on the sidelines. A lack of preparation and analysis in the working documents was also mentioned in regard to the structure, objectives, and implementation of the Gulf Union and the corresponding ambiguity over what the Union would cover in regard to political, legal and moral obligations. On one hand this could demonstrate a collegial approach by Saudi Arabia and an intention to work on the details of the Union together, however it also gave the members pause for concern and led to many unanswered questions. The subsequent meetings do not appear to have progressed **substantive** matters such as the overarching structure of the Gulf Union, with some parties arguing that it should purely be a military union to simplify its approval and subsequent operation. Lack of information was often cited as a reason to reconvene during the period 2012 to 2014, and presumably was a delaying tactic by those who opposed the formation of the Gulf Union.

Putting aside the issue of pooled sovereignty, possible next steps postulated by Dr. Mohammed bin Huwaidin[[36]](#footnote-36) focus on three areas: security, foreign policy and economy. Three options were suggested to address the key driver of enhanced cooperation by forming an agreement on security: the creation of a unified Gulf army (equally represented so as to lessen the threat of a coup); strengthening the Peninsula Shield Force; or creating a defence organisation along the lines of NATO comprised of Gulf states and allies such as the US and France. A further step to integrate foreign policy matters could be via the establishment of a “Gulf Commissioner for Foreign Affairs” comprised by each member state, with a common view on key matters such as the Iranian nuclear program, terrorism and environmental issues. It was also suggested that economic integration already delivered in part through the GCC should be strengthened, by facilitating additional development funding for example. On the wider operation of the GCC, Dr. Huwaidin calls for enhanced capabilities of the GCC Secretariat; funding of research; and transparency. This methodology would then set a precedent for political integration as a subsequent step, building on the successful outcome in the three areas outlined.

# Conclusion

Whilst the GCC enjoys integration in many areas, it now faces key decisions on its structure to meet its objectives, in an often turbulent regional environment. The six member states came together 35 years ago because of their commonality, however as individual states they also have differences, including international bilateral agreements corresponding with the involvement of external actors. Without Oman’s support for the Union it seems unlikely it will proceed immediately, but might be achieved through a staged process as suggested by Dr. Huwaidin. External events may prompt momentum, particularly if there is a perceived withdrawal of US military support amidst the ongoing tensions with Iran. Considering the Gulf Customs Union took over 12 years to be implemented, the complexities to be overcome, and the other achievements of the GCC which may be used as a reason to remain with the status quo, a Gulf Union might still be some years away.

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