

## **The Changing Nature of Threat Perception in GCC States: A Domestic Level Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

The spirit behind the Arab Uprisings in the Middle East was neither an inter-state balance of power rivalry nor was it a movement coloured by religious ideology. It was a struggle by the disgruntled masses at the domestic level who wanted socio-economic and political freedom. Given the huge financial space available, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have managed to withhold the onslaught of the Arab Spring movements, yet their threat perceptions have also changed significantly. However, their strategy of securitisation and sectarianisation of political issues is not a viable nor sustainable option for the future.

**Key words:** GCC states, Securitisation, Sectarianisation, Terrorism, and Salafists.

### **Introduction**

**T**he Twenty First Century has witnessed unprecedented transformation of security dynamics in the world. Terrorism and extremism have changed the threat perception of states. The old security paradigms are giving way to new ones in which many governments now view global security concerns at the domestic level.

The Middle East has remained an epicentre of security-related threats to regional as well as extra-regional states. The events triggered by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 have pushed the region into a security-risk quagmire. Its potential insecurity is inherently associated with the autocratic nature of rule in almost all the states. It is the only region of the world where socio-economic and political freedoms of citizens have been suppressed for maintaining the stability of authoritarian dynastic regimes.

Within this context, the Arab Uprisings<sup>1</sup> took place in December 2010 and disgruntled citizens challenged the supremacy of their rulers. The stunning wave of mass revolts overtook the dictatorial regime in Tunisia, went across Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and finally to Syria. The Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Also coined as the Arab Spring.

monarchies of the Gulf region i.e. the GCC states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman) managed to survive the onslaught of the Arab Spring.

Although the huge financial capital available to these regimes helped them buy off political loyalties of the majority of masses leading to a reduction in the intensity of the Arab Spring, yet societal level vulnerabilities became the chief concerns of policymakers.

‘Societal security’ deals with ‘the threats and vulnerabilities that affect patterns of communal identity and culture.’<sup>2</sup> The communality of socio-economic, political, cultural and ideological affinities among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) makes this issue of societal security transnational in character. Prolonged suppression of socio-economic, civil and political freedoms have made these societies prone to political revolt leading to instability and insecurity. The protest movements in Bahrain and in Eastern Saudi Arabia in 2011 are cases in point. The united stand taken by the GCC governments against mass revolts have eased the situation, but, the sporadic restlessness amongst the citizenry has been continually observed in the region.

The aim of this article is to explore the threats present at the societal level in order to understand the changing security perceptions of the GCC regimes. It is argued that in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, the GCC states have been focusing more on strengthening internal security by addressing the threats emanating at the domestic level. The theoretical framework utilised is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) propounded by Barry Buzan.<sup>3</sup> However, its application is limited to only domestic level analysis. Furthermore, only GCC states of the Persian Gulf Sub-Complex<sup>4</sup> have been selected for analysis.

The main research questions are related to the socio-economic, political and ideological dimensions of insecurity in the region. At the socio-economic level, indicators like population growth, energy consumption levels, declining oil prices and bulging youth unemployment have been used. Secondly, the interplay of socio-economic and political variables has been analysed to assess the reasons behind political dissent in these states. And finally, the association between the political and ideological dimensions of the revolts has been explored for explaining

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Buzan, “New Patterns of Global Security in the 21st Century,” *International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (1991): 431-451.

<sup>3</sup> For full text of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), see Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40-82.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan has considered the Persian Gulf region as a sub-complex of the Middle East Regional Security Complex.

internal insecurity. The major finding lies in the argument that political dissent at the societal level is triggered by socio-economic injustices, which is then coloured by transnational ideological currents threatening the overall security of the states in the region.

### **Socio-economic Dimension**

Unbalanced population growth has become a significant indicator of societal level security threats to the world at large. This is particularly true for those states which are prone to political instability. The population growth in the GCC states shows consistent increase. It has been forecasted that the overall population of the GCC states would rise from 51.1 million in 2014 to 57.6 million by 2016.<sup>5</sup> Although in the past, owing to the huge oil boom, these states have been sustaining the imbalance between resources and their population, the decline in oil prices on which the economies of all these states depend, are putting financial strains on national budgets. For instance,

Prices for Brent crude oil and West Texas Intermediate crude oil dropped by more than half to roughly \$46 per barrel from June 2014 to January 2015. Prices moved upward in spring 2015, but again headed downward, returning to the mid-\$40 range by late August 2015.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Arab Uprisings, the GCC states have been incurring huge expenditure to buy off political support. For instance, in 2014, the late Saudi King Abdullah announced massive spending on the population amounting to \$130 billion.<sup>7</sup> As a whole, the Gulf governments increased their one time social spending from 10.7 per cent by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to 29.5 per cent by the Sultanate of Oman.<sup>8</sup> However, declining oil prices have not allowed them to sustain these huge expenditures. The biggest of GCC states, Saudi Arabia, ran a budget deficit of \$14.4 billion in FY2014 and \$38.6 billion in FY2015 as a result of more than 28 per cent increase in expenditures and declining oil revenues,

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<sup>5</sup> “GCC Demographic and Food Growth,” Brandev EMEA, accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.brandevemea.com/gcc-demographic-and-food-growth/>.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, report (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kirsten Westphal, Marco Overhaus and Guido Steinberg, “The U.S. Shale Revolution and the Arab Gulf States” (SWP Research Paper, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Stokes, “After the Awakening: Future Security Trends in the Middle East” (policy brief, Center for a New American Security, Washington, D.C., 2014).

therefore, the government has drawn more than \$60 billion from state reserves.<sup>9</sup>

The oil resources on which this huge spending has been possible is also subject to decline. Although the reserve-to-production ratio for all these states is quite sufficient i.e. varying between 60 to 90 years, depending upon the current rate of production<sup>10</sup>, still, increased pace of fiscal spending for the last ten years would constrain the capacity of these regimes to provide economic benefits within the coming decade.<sup>11</sup> Although these states are banking upon the capital of the Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) for keeping expenditure sustainable for many years, the income from these funds will depreciate and hasten the depletion of oil resources.<sup>12</sup>

Population growth and declining oil prices are closely linked with the energy consumption levels of these states. Due to rising population, the GCC states' primary energy consumption projections also indicate consistent increase (Figure 1). Being oil export dependent reduces surplus capacity between oil supply and consumption of these states. This is quite evident in the case of Saudi Arabia, which is the biggest oil exporter in the world. Figure 2 shows that in 2009, the energy surplus value for Saudi oil was 7.1 mbd<sup>13</sup>; however, it reduced to 6.2 mbd in 2015 and is projected to reduce further.

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<sup>9</sup> Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision,"

<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/world-population-prospects-the-2012-revision.html>; BP p.l.c., *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, 63rd ed. (London: BP p.l.c, 2014),

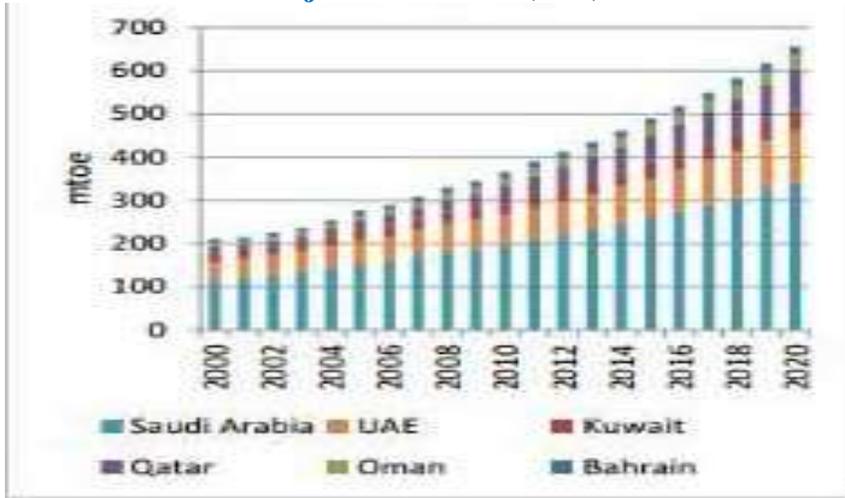
[http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp-country/de\\_de/PDFs/brochures/BP-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2014-full-report.pdf](http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp-country/de_de/PDFs/brochures/BP-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2014-full-report.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Jane Kinninmont, *Future Trends in the Gulf*, Chatham House Report (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

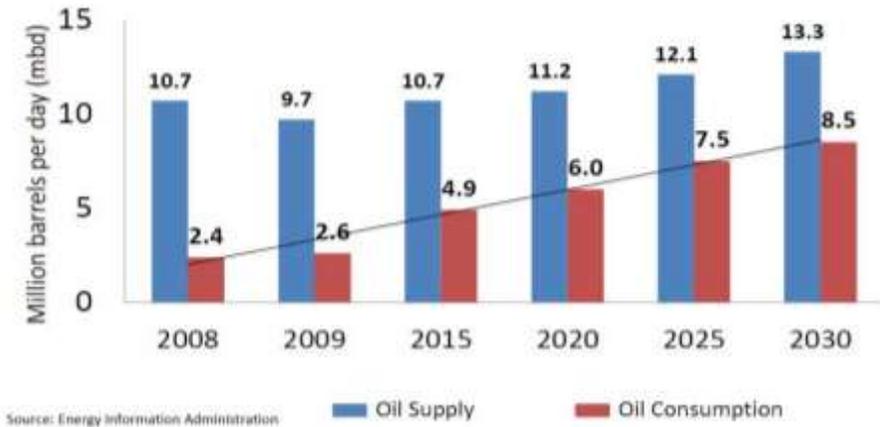
<sup>13</sup> mbd: million barrels per day.

**Figure-1**  
**GCC Primary Energy Consumption (2000-2020)**  
**GCC Primary Energy Consumption**  
**Projections to 2020 (EIU)**



Source: Niki Cutts and Mohamed Salisu, “Business Opportunities in the Gulf” CastleWard.eu, [https://castleward.eu/news/article/business-opportunities-in-the-gulf\\_62](https://castleward.eu/news/article/business-opportunities-in-the-gulf_62).

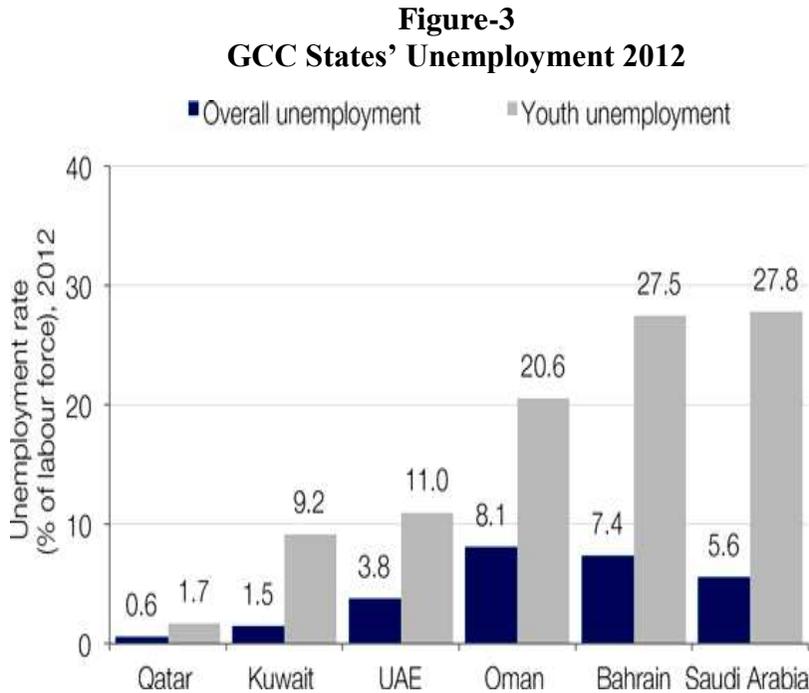
**Figure-2**  
**Saudi Arabia’s Oil Consumption and Supply**  
**KSA’s Oil Consumption & Supply**



Source: Ibid.

Population growth is directly proportional to unemployment in these countries. High youth unemployment rate has been an important issue for

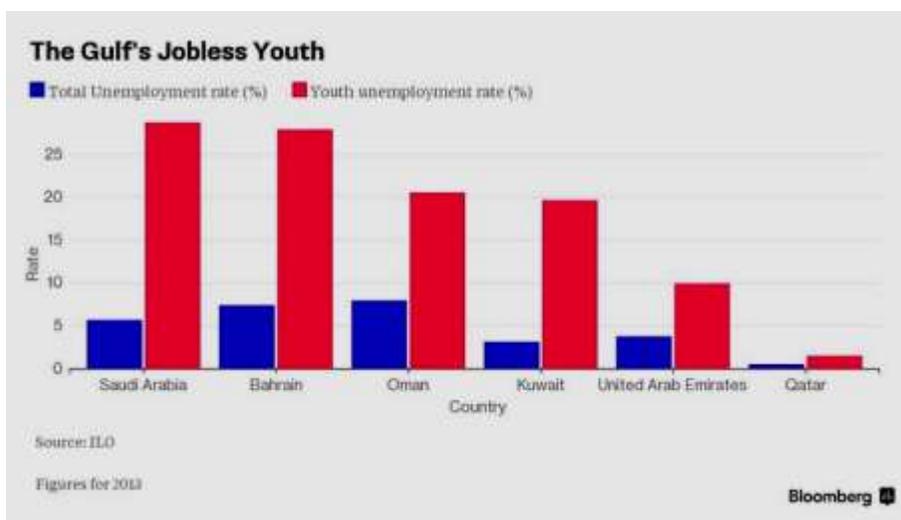
majority of the Gulf states<sup>14</sup>, which has the potential of directing frustrated, but, well-informed youth towards activities leading to state insecurity. Figures 3 and 4 show the latest youth unemployment numbers for 2012 and 2013.



Source: World Economic Forum, *Rethinking Arab Employment - A Systemic Approach for Resource-Endowed Economies* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014),  
[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_MENA14\\_RethinkingArabEmployment.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_MENA14_RethinkingArabEmployment.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Editor's Note: The Arab states which border the Persian Gulf, namely Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

**Figure-4**  
**Gulf's Jobless Youth**



Source: Nafeesa Syeed, “Tech Startups Bloom in Gulf as States try Breaking from Oil,” *Bloomberg.com*, March 9, 2015.

Figure 3 shows that in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, youth unemployment has reached above 1/4<sup>th</sup> of overall employment. The data for 2013 is similar. In Saudi Arabia, in 2011, only 4.1 million Saudis were employed, out of a population of 19.4 million, leading each Saudi wage earner to support an average of four to five dependents.<sup>15</sup> The rate of unemployment for Oman and Kuwait has reached 1/5<sup>th</sup> of overall unemployment.

With the help of huge oil revenues, the GCC citizens are exempt from taxes; and yet despite this, there has been remarkable economic growth, ‘without needing to productively mobilise the entire national labour force. The resulting high population growth has led to today’s inordinately large youth population, with about one-third to one-half of the GCC’s populations under the age of 25.’<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, *50th Annual Report*, report (Riyadh: Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, 2014), [http://www.sama.gov.sa/en-US/EconomicReports/AnnualReport/5600\\_R\\_Annual\\_En\\_50\\_Apx.pdf](http://www.sama.gov.sa/en-US/EconomicReports/AnnualReport/5600_R_Annual_En_50_Apx.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> World Economic Forum, *Rethinking Arab Employment: A Systemic Approach for Resource-Endowed Economies*, report (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014), [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_MENA14\\_RethinkingArabEmployment.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_MENA14_RethinkingArabEmployment.pdf).

## **Political Dimension**

Socio-economic imbalances are inherently linked with political instability of states. The uprisings in the Middle East (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria) displayed that the political revolts against the rulers were also triggered by socio-political unrest in the affected states. The self-immolation by Bouazizi of Tunisia is a case in point. Although this wave of political instability during the Arab Uprisings did not result in regime changes in the Gulf region, their effects were felt seriously. For instance, protests were launched against the governments in Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Since then, the leaders of the GCC states are taking measures to avoid the risks of political violence. The rich oil exporting monarchies have been generally more stable and at lower risk than non-exporting republics in the Middle East when it comes to assessing the potential for political violence.<sup>17</sup>

After reduction in the intensity of the Arab Uprisings, the Gulf states such as UAE and Oman have seen relative stability as compared to other states in the Middle East such as Syria and Yemen. However, the most notable exception to this trend is Saudi Arabia, where the risk rating was increased from moderate to high, reflecting an increase in the number of terrorist attacks and warnings – including some targeting foreigners in the last 12 months.<sup>18</sup> Bahrain has also experienced an intensification of terrorist violence against foreign and business interests in 2014, although the groups responsible for these attacks appear to be Shia extremists.<sup>19</sup>

The overall political violence risk factor in the Gulf region has receded, but it can increase given the region's geographical contiguity with unstable states like Yemen and Iraq. For example, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have continued to affect the risk rating of Jordan, which is high.<sup>20</sup>

The transnational aspect of societal security is highly significant in understanding the spiral effect of political/terrorist-related insecurities in the geographically connected states. Rise of the Islamic State (IS) in mid-2014 and its societal outreach in the region testifies to the severity of terrorist-related risk for the GCC states, particularly for Saudi Arabia. As of September 2015, Saudi officials arrested 1,300 citizens and 300 foreigners on suspicion of connection to the Islamic State, a reflection of the

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<sup>17</sup> Aon Risk Solutions, "2015 Terrorism & Political Violence Risk Map - A Guide: Aon's Guide to Terrorism & Political Violence Risk" (London: Aon plc, 2015), 23-25; "Terrorism and Political Violence Risk Map 2016," Aon plc, <http://www.aon.com/terrorismmap/default.jsp>.

<sup>18</sup> Aon Risk Solutions, "2015 Terrorism & Political Violence Risk Map - A Guide."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Kingdom's firm approach towards perceived domestic security threats.<sup>21</sup> Saudi officials have arrested more than 1,600 suspected IS supporters (more than 400 in July 2015 alone) and claim to have foiled several planned attacks.<sup>22</sup> The IS threat is increasing in other GCC states as well. For instance, an IS-affiliated Saudi suicide bomber blew himself up in a Kuwaiti mosque killing more than two dozen people and wounding hundreds.<sup>23</sup>

Sensing the increased nature of threat, the Gulf states are expanding their definitions of terrorism by linking peaceful dissent and protest with terrorism and are using suppressive measures to crack down, not just on violent extremists, but also on young people calling for human rights and who use the social media for criticising socio-economic and political injustices.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the death sentence given to opposition Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr on terrorism and incitement charges in January 2016; the conviction of human rights activists Mohammed al Qahtani and Abdullah al Hamid in March 2013 on charges of 'breaking allegiance' to the King and the arrest of young Saudis who have produced social media videos criticising the government<sup>25</sup> are the incidences where the government has 'securitised' political issues in self-defence.<sup>26</sup>

The internal political security threats being faced by the Gulf states demand investigation of the alternative forms of political Islam being practiced in the broader region of the Middle East, which can affect the loyalties of marginalised communities. The Turkish Model of Islamist nationalism, Iranian model of Islamist democracy and the recently imposed model of parliamentary democracy in Iraq are the three models of political Islam present in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup> With the advent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, the influence of the Islamist democratic model is increasing, although it is significantly different from the Iranian model where theocratic influences are very strong.

To these classifications, there is a need to add yet another model of political Islam which is based primarily in the Gulf. All the Gulf societies build their states on the basis of 'a marriage of convenience' between the monarchy and quietist Salafism<sup>28</sup>, particularly Wahabism. The *de facto*

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<sup>21</sup> Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmad H. Al-Rahim, "Whither Political Islam and the Arab Spring?" *The Hedgehog Review* 13, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>28</sup> Jessica Stern and J. M. Bergen, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 265-69.

leader of the GCC states, Saudi Arabia, was the first to establish the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia back in 1932 on the basis of a compromise in which the political role was taken over by the Saud Dynasty, while religious authority of the Wahabi clerics was accepted by them.<sup>29</sup> This bargain compelled the Wahabi religious scholars to dissent against the ruling dynasties. Having considerable political, cultural and geographical influence over the smaller GCC states, the same political structure was established in all of them, with the exception of Qatar.

Gamal Abdul Nasser's socialist cum Arab nationalist ideology along with anti-Islamist rhetoric led him to expel the Muslim Brotherhood's top leadership from Egypt.<sup>30</sup> The intellectuals of the Muslim Brotherhood found sanctuary in the Gulf states, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Since the GCC states wanted to unite their populations by using Islamic Salafi ideology, therefore, the presence of educated intellectuals was considered an asset by these regimes. The Muslim Brotherhood educationists established a well-knit network of educational institutions throughout the Gulf. They had control of student unions through which they propagated their teachings.<sup>31</sup> They also penetrated official and unofficial organisations and generated huge resources.<sup>32</sup> Their educational and financial skills allowed them to create significant support among the masses of the Gulf states; and although their following in terms of numbers is low, their significance cannot be underestimated. According to the Pew polls, their support in Kuwait is 34 per cent; whereas in Saudi Arabia and UAE, it is 31 per cent and 29 per cent respectively.<sup>33</sup>

The consequences of the Arab Uprisings brought to power the Islamist-oriented Freedom and Justice Party (offshoot of Muslim Brotherhood) and Ennahda parties in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively. These parties, particularly Freedom and Justice Party vowed to follow the path of AKP in Turkey. The Turkish inclination and support to both parties created an impression in the region, particularly in the Gulf regimes, that an

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of the Middle East* (New York: Westview Press, 2010), 235-40.

<sup>30</sup> Editor's Note: The Society of the Muslim Brothers (shortened to the Muslim Brotherhood) is a transnational Sunni Islamist organisation founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna in 1928.

<sup>31</sup> Royal Institute of International Affairs, "Islamism and its Alternatives in the GCC" (meeting minutes, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> David Pollock, "New Poll shows Majority of Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis Reject ISIS, Back Two-State Solution with Israel," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 23, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-poll-shows-majority-of-saudis-kuwaitis-emiratis-reject-isis-back-two-st>.

alternative model of political Islam was gaining strength, which might challenge their model of quietist Salafist ideology. Before the Arab Spring, the regimes of the Gulf were confronted with and united against the theocratic-based Islamist democracy of Iran at the societal and at the state level. But, the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings gave space to political Salafists in both Egypt and Tunisia, which resulted in a changed threat perception among the Gulf states vis-à-vis political Salafists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, whenever the political Salafists attempted to challenge these regimes, they were subjected to severe repression and the issues related to them were securitised.<sup>34</sup>

However, the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and failure to secure a majority in the Tunisian Parliament by the Ennahda Party pacified these threat perceptions. The Muslim Brotherhood's year-long rule created a popular backlash and a resurgence of secular nationalist sentiment; whereas the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Ennahada Party also lost support to the secular nationalist Nidaa Tounes coalition.<sup>35</sup>

The rise of Islamist parties can be credited to their well-organised networks, which the protest leaning masses did not have owing to their prolonged isolation from political realms. However, the former's quick defeat shows lack of overwhelming support for their particular model of governance. This leads one to conclude that the citizenry needs socio-economic and political development; and are less attracted towards the implementation of any specific Islamic model of governance. Rather, a secular-based model seems to be a preferable choice among the masses at large. Although, secular liberalists are neither organised nor pose any considerable threat to the regimes in the Middle East in general, nor to the regimes of the Persian Gulf region in particular, followers of liberal secularism may become a threat to traditional regimes of the region.

## **Ideological Dimension**

To understand the ideological leanings of the Arab people, it is essential to explore their different ideological strands. Gulf societies mainly follow Salafism; however, Salafists have different strands of activism. The quietist Salafist considers revolt against the rulers as un-Islamic until the ruler has become an apostate.<sup>36</sup> In the Gulf states, the quietists are in majority,

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<sup>34</sup> Stern and Bergen, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 265-69.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Salem, *The Middle East in 2015 and Beyond: Trends and Drivers*, MEI Policy Focus Series 2014-2015 (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2014), <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/The%20Middle%20East%20in%202015.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Stern and Bergen, *ISIS: The State of Terror*.

therefore, their regimes have seen less resistance.<sup>37</sup> The other two strands of Salafism i.e. political and *jihadist*, although in minority, has been a cause for concern and have the potential of challenging these regimes in the near future. For example, one such incident was recorded in early 2013 in Saudi Arabia, when in the town of Buraida, women and children protested against the imprisonment of their family members.<sup>38</sup> Political Salafists believe in a democratic-based peaceful challenge to the rulers and do not go to the extreme for regime change. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the Sahwa or Post-Sahwa group, held responsible for the Islamic awakening movement in early 1990s, has been ideologically associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>39</sup> The Sahwis have been calling for democratic reforms and political freedoms. However, the *Jihadist* Salafists opt for revolutionary means for the pursuance of their ideology of radical change based on the Islamic ‘Caliphate.’ They can challenge the Gulf states with greater impunity.

Revolutionary *Jihadists* have ‘privatised’ *Jihad* (holy war) by allowing their members to use violent means against regimes with the help of supporters of their respective areas.<sup>40</sup> This aspect of their strategy is very significant in terms of the increased threat perception felt by the Gulf states. Although as mentioned earlier, support for *Jihadi* Salafists is insignificant, the ‘privatisation’ of their violent struggle can take a high toll on the states of the region. The Islamic State’s strategy of establishing *wilayets* (political sub-units or provinces) at different regions of the Middle East fits into this category of privatisation of *Jihad*. This strategy has allowed revolutionary *Jihadists* to break up into various affiliates and challenge the *status quo* on the basis of the political, socio-economic and ideological realities of their respective regions. This is evident in the tactical differences employed by the IS in Iraq, where it made use of excessive suicide bombings; and in Syria, where they reduced them.<sup>41</sup> The delegation of authority, to affiliate groups, has enabled them to draw support at the local level on the basis of the political and socio-economic conditions of their areas of control. The terrible conditions in Iraq created space for Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to regroup from the dismantled parent organisation Al-Qaeda. Although Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda objected to the extreme violent

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Royal Institute of International Affairs, “Islamism and its Alternatives in the GCC.”

<sup>39</sup> Toby Matthiesen, “The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy: Islamists and the State in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings” (working paper, Brookings Institute, Washington, D.C., 2015), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia\\_Matthiesen-FINAL.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia_Matthiesen-FINAL.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Stern and Bergen, *ISIS: The State of Terror*.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

means practiced by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (leader of Al-Qaieda in Iraq and creator of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)<sup>42</sup>, the privatisation of *Jihad* within revolutionary Salafists allowed the latter to continue harsh activities like public beheadings and their projection on social media.

Initially, the Sunni tribals of Iraq were not inspired by the violent ideology of revolutionary *Jihadism*. However, the weakening of Iraq engineered by the United States created a situation in which the Sunni tribals and former Baathists were discriminated against politically and socially. This was exploited by the *Jihadists* and with support of the disgruntled elements of society made great territorial and political gains.<sup>43</sup> While the Gulf states are more stable than those in the Levant region,<sup>44</sup> the potential for state weaknesses linked with socio-economic and political disturbances can create fertile ground for political and revolutionary *Jihadists* to grow.

In the context of movements having the potential to cause state insecurity, the role and capacity of secular-minded people in the Gulf region is also important. The level of education in the Gulf states is increasing. In this regard, for example, recent U.S. efforts to expand the number of Saudi students enrolled in American colleges and universities may have cumulative economic, social, and political effects in the future. According to U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Joseph Westphal, as of mid-2014, there were more than 83,000 young Saudi men and women studying in the States.<sup>45</sup> Well-educated young people can develop new social and political reform agendas. Considerable support for a Turkish-inspired Islamist democracy is already present among the educated youth of the Gulf states, but, they are divided along sectarian lines.<sup>46</sup>

## **The Elephant in the Room: Sectarianism**

It is pertinent to consider that the securitisation of socio-political and economic issues are linked to the sectarian politics of the region. The Saudi-Iran relationship, which tends to overshadow other geopolitical concerns is

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Katzman, Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud, Matthew C. Weed, Rhoda Margesson, Alex Tiersky, *The 'Islamic State' Crises and U.S. Policy*, report (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2014), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/231789.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Editor's Note: Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey.

<sup>45</sup> International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board concludes 2015 Article IV Consultation with Saudi Arabia" (press release no. 15/383, IMF Communications Department, Washington, D.C., 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Royal Institute of International Affairs, "Islamism and its Alternatives in the GCC."

coloured by sectarianism and the Persian-Arab rivalry, and this tends to not only 'securitise' but also 'sectarinise' internal and inter-state matters.

A closer reading of transnational politics indicates that the 'new' cold war in the Middle East has a bottom-up approach in which the states' weaknesses at the domestic level provide space to outside external forces to intervene.<sup>47</sup> The examples of Iraq since 2003 and that of Syria since 2011 highlight how domestic weaknesses based on socio-economic and political disturbances have made certain individuals more vulnerable, resulting in trans-regional affiliations with their respective societal groups on the basis of sectarian identities, to grow. The use of non-state actors, who have political and ideological connections with the intervening states, has become the norm in the regional 'cold war' in Iraq and Syria.<sup>48</sup>

Anticipating security and political threats from the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia, as well as the UAE and Kuwait 'securitised' the activities of this organisation. The government of UAE has also increased crackdowns on Al-Islah, an Islamist organisation suspected of having links with the Muslim Brotherhood; and the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz called the Brotherhood the 'source of all problems in the Muslim world.'<sup>49</sup> The Government of Kuwait even had a close door session of its Parliament and debated its activities in the Gulf.<sup>50</sup>

With respect to revolutionary Salafi *Jihadism*, all GCC states have similar threat perceptions, however, in connection to the political Salafism of affiliated groups of Muslim Brotherhood, there is a prominent dichotomy between Qatar and rest of the GCC, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE. Just like the rest, Qatar has given shelter to the Muslim Brotherhood intellectuals in the past. There is a considerable following of Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Qatar. Its educationists have not only built the educational system in Qatar, they have also taught its bureaucrats; therefore, it has many sympathisers in the Qatari establishment.<sup>51</sup> In fact, support of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups inside the Gulf region (as well as in Egypt and Syria) led to a very intense diplomatic row between Qatar and the Saudi, Emirati and Kuwaiti governments in 2014 resulting in the

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<sup>47</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War" (analysis paper, no. 11, Brookings Doha Center, Doha, 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Eugenio Dacrema, "New Emerging Balances in the Post-Arab Spring: The Muslim Brotherhood and the Gulf Monarchies" (ISPI Analysis no. 155, Institute for International Political Studies, Milan, 2013), [http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis\\_155\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis_155_2013.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Alexey Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry," *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 4 (2015).

withdrawal of their ambassadors from Doha. Although the diplomatic crisis has thawed and currently there is full diplomatic engagement between the Gulf regimes, yet, the incident has exposed disunity among the GCC states, which is a significant post-Arab Spring development. This divergence of interests has also affected the GCC's joint stand against Iran in Persian Gulf politics.

Qatar does not perceive the Muslim Brotherhood as a security threat. Instead its strategy is to utilise the group for enhancing its geopolitical ambitions. Qatar has a tiny population, along with tremendous energy resources, particularly natural gas reserves, and has the highest per capita income in the world.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the chances of its population moving towards political revolt are dim. Further, Doha's aim of diverting energy reserves towards the north to Turkey and Egypt needs strategically allied governments in those countries. Turkey's strategic alliance with Qatar in Libya, while the former's support for the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt testifies to the above mentioned strategic reality.

Qatar has been using its huge financial reserves and its media outlet Al-Jazeera for propagating Muslim Brotherhood ideology. Its highly revered scholar Yusuf Qaradawi has been given special academic and official respect in Qatar; and he has been using the platform of Al-Jazeera for propagating the cause of his organisation.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the Al-Jazeera channel has gained tremendous popularity within the Gulf due to its comprehensive coverage of the Arab Spring events make it a valuable tool in the hands of the Qatar regime and Muslim Brotherhood for spreading their narrative.

Qatar's divergent stand vis-à-vis other Gulf regimes regarding the role of Muslim Brotherhood has affected the sectarian rhetoric of the Sunni regimes. However, the divergent stand vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood has put a wedge in the Salafi interpretation of Islam of the Sunni regimes of the region. Although Qatar and Oman have been less provocative against Iranian-based Shia threats to their states, they had been following the Saudi, Kuwaiti and Emirati tune against the Iranian regime. But, Doha's position on Muslim Brotherhood might now bring it close to Tehran in its strategic calculations. Currently, the probability of this realignment is not high, but this can change if the Muslim Brotherhood phenomenon strengthens further in the region. Countering such a scenario might be the rationale behind the strategic policies of the Gulf states.

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<sup>52</sup> Dacrema, "New Emerging Balances in the Post-Arab Spring."

<sup>53</sup> Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry."

## **Conclusion**

The socio-economic injustices and political suppression perpetrated for safeguarding Arab regimes has resulted in producing a sense of alienation among their citizens, which can easily sway them towards political revolt. The consequential restlessness provides space to transnational revolutionary ideologues to exploit the situation and give ideological colour to political movements. Fearing threat to their stability, regime managers have also adopted a similar route by branding these movements with sectarian or ethnic labels. The interplay of all these complicated strategies and propaganda create a wedge in society. The use of religion either by the regimes or by the non-state actors aggravates the situation further leading to an overall insecurity scenario for people as well as governments.

Instead of 'securitising' or 'sectarianising' socio-political issues, the lessons from the Arab Spring demand a reformation of the socio-economic and political dynamics currently in place in GCC countries so that the alienation being experienced by the citizenry can be addressed. The people are the real power of states and if they are satisfied socially, economically and politically, they will remain loyal to their states and leaders. Although the wave of Arab Uprisings has receded for the time being, it has not evaporated and can rebound with greater vigour in the regions which have not understood the spirit behind the revolt of the Arab people. ■