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Intra-GCC security dynamics: the case of Oman

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Table of Contents

04 **Abstract**

05 **Introduction**

08 **Intra-GCC security dynamics**

08 ***A historical perspective.***

14 ***Intra-GCC security concerns.***

20 **Case study: Oman and intra-GCC security dynamics.**

20 ***Muscat, a nonconformist GCC?***

23 ***Oman and intra-GCC security dynamics***

28 **Conclusion**

Abstract

A number of factors - including the geopolitical imbalances, disputes over borders, the competition for energy resources and political influence - have characterised relations among the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since their establishment as independent states. While very reticent on security and defence integration, enticed by the benefits of cooperation, GCC countries managed their conflicts by finding an internal and external balance-of-threat. However, with growing divergences among the monarchies and the external pressures generated by the Arab Spring happening in the context of systemic shifts in the regional geopolitics, intra-GCC relations underwent a significant securitization. The existing dynamics to balancing threats have been put into question. The securitised context has highlighted once again perennial issues in the intra-GCC security calculus, such as questions of sovereignty concerns or of contested borders, historical rivalries or hegemonic ambitions based on asymmetries of geopolitical or economic power. In this sense, the interconnectedness of the GCC monarchies among themselves can provide the avenue for trans-national issues to prosper, including many bearing significant security concerns. This paper will explore all of these issues focusing specifically on the case study of the Sultanate of Oman. While long considered an outlier among the GCC monarchies, this paper will argue that, in spite of all the existing differences between the Sultanate and the other GCC monarchies, Muscat is as much embroiled as the other monarchies in intra-GCC security dynamics. Additionally, the paper will argue that structural conditions suggest that under the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq al-Sa'id, Oman will be further rather than less absorbed by intra-GCC security dynamics.

Short bio

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Introduction

Relations among the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been the object of several studies, especially in the area literature, over the past few decades. Among studies pertaining to economic or political relations or historical accounts on the establishment of the GCC or of its member states as nation-states, scholars have devoted efforts to analyse the GCC in the context of security studies.[1] Placed in a markedly volatile region, the GCC have provided very relevant case studies for the literature on threats and security relations.[2] Two themes have been particularly developed by scholars: the level of security cooperation and integration within the GCC – both as individual states and as an organization – and the mechanisms of the threat balance in the wider Gulf region.[3]

Addressing the former – intra-GCC security cooperation - has led to a number of studies discussing what kind of security organization is the GCC. Some scholars have defined the GCC an unorthodox ‘security community’, i.e. a group of states sharing values, identities - and agendas - tied together by supranational links and collective security mechanisms[4]. Christian Koch has, for instance, highlighted that looking at the coordination on foreign policy issues, especially between the 1980s and 1990s, the GCC could be defined a ‘heterogeneous’ security community.[5] GCC states have similar political, economic and social systems, speak the same language, share similar patterns in their past two centuries of history and many anthropological tropes, looking back at similar social and religious customs and traditions. Taking stock of these strong social bonds, Gregory Gause and Michael Barnett argued that the GCC has provided its citizens with a rhetorical and an institutional alternative identity beyond that of the state, the ‘khaliji’ identity, that would compete with Iran’s Islamic revolutionary and Iraq’s secular Arab nationalist platform thus providing the potential for the future development of an identifiable ‘security community' at both the intergovernmental and non-governmental level.[6]

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[1] See for example: Lawrence G. Potter, and Gary G. Sick (eds.) *Security in the Persian Gulf*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; Matteo Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economy Coordination in a Changing Middle East*. Vol. 44. IB Tauris, 2011.

[2] Amitav Acharya. “The periphery as the core: The third world and security studies.” *Critical Security Studies*, 2002, pp. 323-352.

[3] An example of the first is: Matteo Legrenzi. “Did the GCC make a difference? Institutional realities and (un) intended consequences.” Matteo Legrenzi and Cilja Harders (eds) *Beyond Regionalism? Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 119-136. An example of the second is: Scott Cooper. “State-centric balance-of-threat theory: the misunderstood Gulf Cooperation Council.” *Security Studies* 13.2, 2003,: pp.306-349.

[4] The definition of security communities has been forged in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, ed., *Security Communities*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[5] Christian Koch. “The GCC as a regional security organization.” *KAS International Reports* 11, 2010, p. 27.

Finally Kristian Ulrichsen has argued that the formation of the GCC has generated a 'loose security community' among the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula.[7] On the opposite end of the spectrum, consistent part of the scholarship has argued that the GCC cannot be defined as a full-fledged security community, as it lacks sovereign supranational security institutions and has developed a poor level of integration in security and defence policies.[8] For instance, Neil Partrick wrote that 'the GCC remains a cooperative alliance of states whose agreements were never intended to fundamentally compromised their sovereignty, and that their attachment to each other is limited by degrees of mistrust and a related focus on western security partners'.[9]

The period beginning after the Arab Spring of 2011 in the GCC put all of the previous studies on intra-GCC security relations into question. In fact, the GCC monarchies' perceptions of the events of 2011 and of the possible developments in the regional politics were so divergent that triggered existential crisis in the GCC.[10] In 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain withdrew their Ambassadors from Qatar for eight months, protesting that Qatar supported groups that were destabilising the region. The crisis was solved only with the signing of official agreements between the states, known as Riyadh Agreements, committing signatories to basically align on misaligned perceptions. However, accusing Qatar of not having respected the Riyadh Agreements, the same three countries – Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain- joined by Egypt, placed a *tout-court* political boycott and economic embargo on Qatar in June 2017. Crucially, both Kuwait and Oman decided to remain neutral in the crisis and demonstrated that they did not share the perceptions of the anti-Qatar quartet. This latter crisis is the gravest that the GCC faced in three decades of existence and if it did not lead to the disintegration of the body, it certainly negated the arguments that the GCC can be considered a security community in the post-Arab Spring context. In fact, the literature has new questions to confront when looking at contemporary intra-GCC security relations. It is here argued that the Arab Spring has highlighted growing divergences among the monarchies and the interconnectedness of the GCC monarchies among themselves has been interpreted as enabling a multitude of trans-national security challenges to prosper. Hence, rather than defining the GCC as a security community, the idea of a regional security complex, i.e., as defined by Barry Buzan, a geographic area in which members perceive one another as possible sources of threat and invest most of their resources and attention worrying about their own neighbours, seems more fitting.[11]

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[6] Michael Barnett, and F. Gregory Gause. "Caravans in opposite directions society, state and the deG velopment of a community in the Gulf Cooperation Council." *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* 62.1, 1998, pp. 161-197.

[7] Kristian Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 26.

[8] See for example Legrenzi. *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf.*

[9] Neil Partrick. "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?" Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper No. 19, 2011.

[10] Cinzia Bianco and Gareth Stansfield. "The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011." *International Affairs 94.3, 2018,* pp. 613-635.

Addressing the Gulf region's threat balance, led to a number of studies detailing the evolution of the security calculus in the GCC. Scholars have analysed in-depth the external threats posed to the GCC monarchies by revolutionary Iran and Iraq, the internal threats posed to the GCC regimes by members of their own societies, and more. Anthony Cordesman's comprehensive study on *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability* focused on realist and neo-realist considerations in relation to the threat posed by Iran.[12] Similarly, David Priess writes on Iran and neo-realist assumptions but changes policy drivers from balance-of-power to balance-of-threat .[13] In *Insecure Gulf,* Kristian Ulrichsen represents scholars broadening the notions of threat to incorporate a wide range of economic, societal, environmental, demographic challenges to societal stability.[14] Adopting a constructivist approach, Ulrichsen argues that Gulf security is evolving as internal political and socioeconomic changes in the Gulf states interact with the processes of globalization and that stability in the GCC countries is threatened not only by the conventional "hard security" threats but also by so-called "soft security" challenges to human security.[15] What arguably remains underdeveloped, is the literature analysing the threats that GCC countries can pose, and have posed, to one another.

This article in fact aims to position itself at the intersection between the studies on the intra-GCC security relations and dynamics and those on the threat calculus of the GCC region. In particular this paper analyses how the interconnectedness of the security realms within the GCC may transform the GCC space in a source of threats for members of the organization. This is especially the case when the GCC space is securitised, as it has been the case in the period after the Arab Spring and culminating with the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC crises. In other words, this paper will argue that the GCC countries can pose formidable threats to one another, and this is mainly due to the unique security dynamics within the GCC. To argue for this point, the article will examine the case study of the Sultanate of Oman. While long considered an outlier among the GCC monarchies, this paper will argue that, in spite of all the existing differences between the Sultanate and the other GCC monarchies, Muscat is as much embroiled as the other monarchies in intra-GCC security dynamics. As the Sultanate of Oman goes through its first leadership transition in 2020, the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq al-Sa'id, will arguably face centripetal forces that will result in a higher not lower exposure to intra-GCC security dynamics.

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[11] The regional security complex theory first appears in Barry Buzan*, People, States and Fear*, Lynne Rienner, 1991). The area studies literature has usually referred the concept to the whole MENA region. See: Fred Halliday. *The Middle East in international relations: power, politics and ideology.* Vol. 4. Cambridge University Press, 2005; Raymond Hinnebusch. *The international politics of the Middle East*, Manchester University Press, 2003.

[12] Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability*, Westview, 1984.

[13] David Priess, 'Balance-of-Threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council', *Security Studies*, 5, 1996.

[14] Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf.*

[15] Ibid.

The structure of the paper will reflect the main arguments: the first section will critically analyse intra-GCC security relations in a historical perspective and their reticence on security and defence integration. Then it will be argued that such reticence has been driven by a realization of the sensitive nature of intra-GCC security dynamics, characterised by: sovereignty concerns, contested borders, historical rivalries, hegemonic ambitions based on asymmetries of geopolitical or economic power, the prowess of trans-national security challenges to travel across borders. Finally, the second section will explore all of these issues focusing specifically on the case study of the Sultanate of Oman, first by defining the peculiarities of the monarchy as a GCC outlier, then by analysing the level of Oman's embroilment into the intra-GCC dynamics regardless of its peculiar position within the organization.

Intra-GCC security dynamics.

A historical perspective.

When discussing the formation of the GCC, many scholars go back to realist interpretations, predominant since Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory described the GCC as a balancing alignment 'intended to limit potential pressure from both Iran and the Soviet Union.'[16] As a matter of fact, reflecting upon the nature of relations among the six GCC countries and the rationale of the Gulf Cooperation Council as an organization, specifically with reference to the realm of security, historical milestones and the related discourses cannot be escaped. There is a certain consensus in the literature that the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 is directly related to the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the emergence of a revolutionary regime in Tehran intent on exporting its revolution to the neighbourhood and the subsequent outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980.[17] By coming together, the six monarchies

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16- Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 270.

17- Among others, a careful account of the GCC's formation is in Abdulkhaleq Abdulla. "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature Origin, and Process." In Michael Hudson (ed), *Middle East Dilemma: The politics and economics of Arab integration*, Columbia University Press, 1999.

intended to present something akin to a common front to common security needs, because these events were perceived as threatening the very survival of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. This can be verified against intellectual concepts employed to describe the GCC mission, for instance in its founding documents, including ideas of unity, integration, cooperation and coordination.[18]

However, these initial concepts clash with further content of the same founding documents, as specific measures pertaining to security and defence cooperation were not alluded to in the original charter. The reason is that, since the body's inception, the GCC monarchies have disagreed on pursuing common formulas in these realms. In 1984, the GCC established a collective military force named Peninsula Shield Force. Among its primary objectives, there was to deter the Iraqi regime led by Saddam Hussein, from invading Kuwait.[19] Having failed to deter an Iraqi invasion, the Peninsula Shield Force again showed its ineffectiveness when only the intervention of the international coalition assembled by the United States was able to roll back Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991.[20] These shortcomings drove a different conversation in the GCC, as Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said, the ruler of Oman and head the newly formed GCC Higher Committee for Security Arrangements, proposed to the GCC that it develop a large standing army of 100,000 troops.[21] However, the proposal encountered opposition from several angles and, most importantly, it did not receive backing from Saudi Arabia, which would have been relied upon to contribute most of the troops. In 1994, GCC Defence Ministers resolved to increase the size of the Peninsula Shield Force to 25,000 troops and, a year later, discussion about a large standing army were definitely shelved.[22] Then in 1991, the GCC countries tried a different route, that of pan-Arab cooperation. In March 1991, they signed the Damascus Declaration, whereby Egypt and Syria would provide ground forces for the defence of the Gulf in exchange for Gulf assistance.[23] However, the Damascus Declaration never got beyond the declaration stage, because GCC leaders had greater confidence and less suspicion of foreign actors. Indeed, GCC leaders doubled down on their defence and security cooperation with the United States (US) and the United

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[18] For the original charter, refer to the website of the GCC under http://www.gcc-sg.org/ (accessed 12 December 2016) and for a collection of statements from ruling elites cfr. John E. Peterson, "The GCC and Regional Security," in John A. Sandwick, ed., *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Moderation and Stability in an Interdependent World*, Westview, 1986, pp. 171-173.

[19] Robert Mason. "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force: A Case Study of a Small State's Search for Security." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41.4, 2014, pp. 361.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., p.363.

[23] Rosemary Hollis. "'Whatever Happened to the Damascus Declaration?': Evolving Security Structures in the Gulf." In Jane Davis (ed), *Politics and International Relations in the Middle East. Continuity and Change*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 1995.

(UK), signing and renewing bilateral agreements on bases and military ties.[24] In 1996, as a result of the 1991 Defense Cooperation Agreement signed between Qatar and Washington, Qatar built a military base in al-Udeid that would come to serve as the United States Central Command's forward headquarters. Similarly Bahrain signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States in October 1991 granting US forces access to Bahraini facilities – and Manama hosts the headquarters of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet - and ensuring the right to pre-position material for future crises. These agreements concretely represented a demonstration of divergence of purposes within the GCC. While some GCC players hoped that the Peninsula Shield Force would emerge as a competent force able to contribute to regional self-defence, the smaller GCC monarchies preferred to rely on the more effective external, primarily American, assistance.[25]

Amid comprehensive defence agreements signed with the US, Saddam Hussein's regime severely weakened after the First Gulf War and a moderate government in power in Iran under Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, which sought to establish cooperative relations with GCC neighbours, Gulf monarchs felt additional security and defence provisions were not necessary.[26] The issue of defence integration at the GCC level was side-lined. In terms of policies, the GCC member states concluded in the year 2000 the GCC Joint Defence Agreement, based on the principle that any aggression against a member state would be considered as aggression against all the GCC states, thus theoretically introducing the obligation to provide military assistance to one another.[27] On paper, the agreement established a Joint Defence Council and a Military Committee to supervise cooperation which, however, scarcely progressed beyond consultation.[28] Two following external events brought again collective security and defence to the forefront. In 2003, the US invaded Iraq triggering a ripple effect of insecurity that threatened to expand beyond Iraqi borders and towards the GCC monarchies.[29] In 2005, the former Revolutionary Guard Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, employing a hawkish rhetoric towards the GCC, was elected at the Iranian presidency. [30] That same year, 2005, the GCC countries signed a Counter-Terrorism Agreement that provided for unprecedented coordination in intelligence sharing and cross-border cooperation.[31] However, this was rather in response to domestic threats posed by jihadist groups, which since the early 2000s had become active in the entire Arabian Peninsula.[32] Groups such as Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and their affiliates, had surfaced in the GCC and initiated particularly effective campaigns in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. These groups' operational tactics were intrinsically cross-borders and thus intra-GCC coordination was inescapable to counter the threat. For instance, Kuwait-based Lions of the Peninsula Brigades were linked to the Saudi-based al-Haramain Brigades, themselves an AQAP subgroup. On the external security front, GCC coordination advanced more slowly. In December 2006, Saudi Arabia called for the adoption of the principle of 'centralized command and de-centralized forces': each GCC state would assign specific military units to be stationed within each state's national territory as part of the new proposed military structure responding to a unified central command. [33] It was an ambitious proposal, which however GCC states never discussed seriously. On the other hand, some tangible progress was made a few years later, on a 2009 proposal to create a joint naval force for quick intervention to combat piracy.[34]

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[24] See for instance Mohd Naseem Khan. "The US policy towards the Persian Gulf: Continuity and change." *Strategic Analysis* 25.2, 2001, pp. 197-213, Gawdat Bahgat. "Military Security and Political Stability in the Gulf." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1995, pp. 55-70; Jeffrey R. Macris, *The politics and security of the Gulf: Anglo-American hegemony and the shaping of a region.* Routledge, 2010.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Abdullah K. Alshayji "Mutual Realities, Perceptions, and Impediments Between the GCC States and Iran." in Potter and Sick (eds) *Security in the Persian Gulf*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2002, pp. 217-237.

[27] Gordon Brown and Kenneth Katzman. "Gulf Cooperation Council Defense Agreement." *Congressional Research Service*, Library of Congress, 2001.

[28] Koch. "The GCC as a regional security organization.", p. 25.

[29] Ibid.

In a pattern already registered before, as the regimes entered into a period of profound instability and insecurity, since 2011, talks of security and defence cooperation and integration accelerated. The chain of popular protests known as Arab Spring, which unseated decades-old regimes in North Africa and Yemen and quickly spread to Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, represented a momentum of vulnerability for the monarchies' stability.[35] This was especially the case for Bahrain, where large numbers of Shi'a citizens, with Shi'a being the country's majority, embarked in a sustained and vigorous revolt against the Sunni ruling family.[36] As a response, in March 2011, troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE - under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Force - entered Bahrain at the request of the King to quell the riots. It was the first activation of the 2000 GCC Joint Defense Agreement and the second deployment of the Peninsula Shield Forces since their establishment in 1984. The Saudi and Emirati officers stayed in Bahrain for months, taking over the protection of critical infrastructures in the small island Kingdom. However, if on one hand the years after 2011 represented a momentum for cooperation and coordination, this momentum appears limited to policing, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism at the state level, rather than paving the road for full-fledged integration against threats. In November 2012 the six governments signed the GCC Internal Security Pact, empowering each GCC country to take legal action, based on its own legislation, against citizens, residents, or organized groups that are linked to crime, terrorism or activist dissent in any other GCC state.[37] This is one of the most robust agreement ever signed by the GCC countries, calling for signatory states to: share personal information of citizens (Article 4); integrate the security apparatuses and operational commands during times of disturbances and disasters (Article 10); allow security forces to enter into the territory of another signatory state - the distance based on bilateral agreements between parties - during pursuits of wanted individuals (Article 14); allow the immediate extradition of wanted individuals within its territory to other state parties (Article 16).[38]

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[30] Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms." in Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds), *The Small Gulf States*. Routledge, 2016, pp. 99-116.

[31] Koch. "The GCC as a regional security organization.", p. 25.

[32] Thomas Mattair "Mutual threat perceptions in the Arab/Persian Gulf: GCC perceptions." *Middle East Policy 14.2, 2007*, pp. 133-141.

[33] Koch. "The GCC as a regional security organization", p. 25.

[34] "GCC states agree on joint military force," *Oman Tribune*, 16 December 2009; "GCC decides to form joint naval force,", *Arab News*, 27 October 2009.

[35] Silvia Colombo. "The GCC countries and the Arab Spring. Between outreach, patronage and ree pression.", in John Davis (ed), *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy*, Routledge, 2016.

[36] Ibid.

It is striking that while such an agreement has been reached and invoked already in few years, the most substantial and pragmatic collective initiative in external security, the establishment of a GCC ballistic missile defence architecture and early warning system, although encouraged by the United States since 1998 and pushed remarkably in 2015, has never seen the light.[39] While in November 2016 the GCC countries launched "Arab Gulf Security 1", the first joint Gulf-wide exercise, this again was focused primarily on intra-GCC security, and was approved and conducted under the authority of the Ministries of Interior rather than the Ministries of Defence.[40]

In fact, not even the especially sensitive dynamics triggered in 2011 were able to push tangible GCC integration, despite some vigorous pushes in that direction. In particular in 2011 then Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud declared that it was time for the GCC member states to move from the phase of cooperation to the phase of union within a single entity.[41] This idea, circulating among the GCC leaders since the 1980s, was supported by Bahrain but met a half-hearted response from the other countries, vowing to put it on hold. When, in 2013, Saudi Arabia pushed to discuss the subject again, Oman formally and publicly rejected its participation to a potential Union, effectively sinking the idea, to the relief of many in Qatar and Kuwait as well.[42] These circumstances exemplified the contradictory drivers within the GCC: the very fact that the idea of a full Union can be ventilated clarifies how strong is the bond between the states, but the fact that it never materialised highlights how these six monarchies choose to remain six distinct entities with their own agendas, priorities, policies. For their defence, the GCC countries continued to prefer relying on military assistance from an outside power, especially the US, as they had done since the 1990s.[43] This was despite the fact that the GCC regimes – particularly Saudi Arabia - had to cope with the security dilemma engendered by the presence of US bases on their soil. While representing an effective deterrent against external threats, the presence of US military on Saudi soil, where the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina are located, has generated considerable domestic criticism of the regime.[44] Indeed, depending on the United States highlights the failure of local regimes to protect their citizens and is particularly problematic because criticism of US policy in the Middle East has traditionally been strong in the Arab public opinion. All these factors fuelled the anti-regime rhetoric of non-state jihadist groups such as Al Qa'ida.[45] On one hand, this choice has been analysed as a by-product of the realization by GCC policy-makers of the GCC militaries' ineffectiveness. This ineffectiveness has profusely been discussed by the literature and attributed to a specific policy choice of the regimes to keep their own armed forces fragmented. This policy of fragmentation, dubbed by the literature 'coup-proofing', has been explained, among others, by Steffen Hertog as a reaction to a number of coups planned in the 1960s and 1970s, driving regime elites to build up an 'army to watch the army' to reduce the risks of a military takeover.[46] In addition, security forces served well as an instrument of patronage, whereby different security institutions are created to balance the ambitions of different factions within the ruling families and as mechanisms to redistribute rents derived from energy resources to cement dynamics of co-optation.[47] While accepting these findings in the literature, this paper aims to highlight that the lack of integration among security institutions and forces at the GCC level, and the ups and downs in the discourses around those, are also driven by full-fledged intra-GCC security concerns. If GCC monarchs had security concerns relating to one another as sources of threats, this inevitably slowed down initiatives to further integrate, especially in the realms of security and defence.

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[37] The pact was not public but details were leaked from the local press. See for example "GCC Secue rity Pact: Kuwait holding back", *Al Akhbar*, 6 March 2015.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Peppino DeBiaso. "Missile Defense and the GCC: Strengthening Deterrence through a New Framework." *Harvard International Review* 37.3, 2016, p. 89.

[40] Andreas Krieg. "Gulf security policy after the Arab Spring: considering changing security dynamm ics." in Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds), *The Small Gulf States*. Routledge, 2016, pp. 57-73.

[41] Ibid., p. 61.

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[42] See the introduction in Andreas Krieg, ed. *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*. Springer, 2019.

[43] Geoffrey Kemp. "The Persian Gulf remains the strategic prize." *Survival* 40.4, 1998, pp. 132-149; Gregory Gause III, *The international relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[44] Fred H. Lawson "Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf" in Mehran Kamrava, ed. *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*. Syracuse University Press, 2011; Clive A. Jones, 'Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War: The Internal–External Security Dilemma', *International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 6, 1995.

[45] Fawaz A. Gerges *The far enemy: why Jihad went global*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[46] Steffen Hertog, "Rentier militaries in the Gulf states: the price of coup-proofing." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43 (3), 2011, pp. 400-402.

Intra-GCC security concerns.

Several scholars have identified the element of sovereignty as central to the conceptualization of the matter of security and defence integration in the GCC.[48] Much of the literature dissecting the overall status of the GCC as a regional security organization since the organization's inception in the 1980s, has argued that the GCC has been unable to establish itself as a full-fledged regional security organization mainly due to a high degree of resistance to giving up on its sovereignty that resulted in the lack of a supranational authority or form of legitimacy. In these regards, writing in 2009, Louise Fawcett has noted that in the Gulf sovereignty has been 'a prize to be nurtured, not one to be sacrificed on the altar of a pan-Arab movement, or one that extolled the virtues of integration.'[49] This can also be explained by the fact that the GCC see themselves as young nation-states whose independence is, historically speaking, recent and are still in the process of realizing and enforcing the full perimeter of their sovereignty.

A classic empirical case for that is on intra-GCC border issues. Many of those were resolved only in the 2000s with the 2003 UAE - Oman boundary agreement, the settlement of the Bahrain-Qatar dispute on the Hawar islands by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2001 and the finalization of the demarcation agreement on maritime borders by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 2000.[50] Notwithstanding, some border issues – including some of those technically resolved - remained relevant in following years. Tribes from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman hold diverging views on the sovereignty over the Al Buraimi Oasis.[51] A dispute on the maritime borders between the UAE and Saudi Arabia has led to skirmishes and short detainments, including in March

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Partrick. "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?"

[49] Louise Fawcett, "Alliances, Cooperation and Regionalism in the Middle East", in Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2009, Second Edition, p. 196.

[50] Partrick. "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?"

[51] Buthaina Hussen Alfadhli. "Boundaries and Territorial Disputes in the GCC States.", *Middle East Diplomacy,* 2018.

2010.[52] Amid the intra-GCC crisis of 2017, Bahrain has re-stated, at least at the level of political rhetoric, its claims over the Hawar islands, assigned to Qatar by the ICJ.[53] Even more heated are the disagreements with stark economic implications. The decades-old dispute between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait over oil production in the shared "Neutral Zone", a border area which still lacks precise demarcation, is a case in point. Over the years, the two countries have clashed over the granting of production rights to foreign oil companies, the building of a refinery in this territory, and the accrediting of workers operating in the area, leading to a prolonged shutdown of two fields, al-Khafji and al-Wafra, between 2014 and 2015.[54] In December 2019, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait finally reached an agreement to demarcate the borders in the "Neutral Zone" and re-start oil production.[55] However, immediately several Kuwaiti civil society groups, including members of tribal groups hailing from the area, started organizing to contest the agreement with Kuwait's Constitutional Court.[56]

Another factor to inevitably consider is the asymmetry in power metrics among the GCC countries. Of the six monarchies, one, Saudi Arabia with a population of over 30 million, is considerably larger, and the other five can instead be categorised as small states, with Bahrain – which, according to a 2010 census, has approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, less than half of whom are Bahraini nationals[57] - bordering the definition of a micro-state. Inevitably, this asymmetry has pushed stronger caution over sovereignty on the part of the smaller GCC monarchies, fearing that integration would translate into Saudi hegemony.[58] With specific reference to defence, a large standing force would likely be led and dominated by Saudi Arabia and could possibly be used at some stage to even intimidate and influence the others. These concerns, stemming from power differentials, played a role in encouraging individual GCC monarchies to pursue security arrangements or defence pacts with external states instead of developing more internal cooperative security networks.[59] Bilateral alliances with external super powers like the United States have been used in balancing against Saudi interference, in what Gerd Nonneman calls 'omni-balancing'.[60] For example, in 1992, Qatar signed a defence cooperation agreement with the United States that included a transfer of U.S. military personnel from Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid Air Base, not far from the royal palace in Doha.[61] That same year, border skirmishes between Saudi Arabia and Qatar broke out in Khafus.[62] An omni-balancing rationale can also be applied to the decision of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s Istanbul Process in the early 2000s.[63] In this sense, from the point of view of the smaller GCC monarchies, a significant US presence on their territory would be a deterrent to the expansionist ambitions of Iraq and Iran but, likewise, to potential hegemonic ambitions of Saudi Arabia.[64] Qatar believes that Saudi Arabia was going to launch a military offensive against it as part of the measures initiated during the intra-GCC crises, both in 2014 and 2017. In 2014, according to the Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting of US President Barack Obama, Ben Rhodes, only pressures from the US prevented such escalation.[65]

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[52] Jeffrey Martini et al. *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation,* Rand Corporation, 2016, p. 9.

[53] Alfadhli. "Boundaries and Territorial Disputes in the GCC States."

[54] Martini et al. *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, p.10.

[55] "Kuwait, Saudi Arabia start trial oil pumping from divided zone: Kuwait minister", *Reuters*, 16 February 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-saudi-oil/kuwait-saudi-arabia-start-trial-oil-pumping-from-divided-zone-kuwait-minister-idUSKBN20A0I9 (accessed 1 March 2020).

[56] Author's interview with a former Kuwaiti Member of Parliament, Doha, January 2020.

[57] Quoted in Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadhi, Philippe Kirsch, Mahnoush H. Arsanjani, "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry", Manama, 23 November 2011, p. 9.

[58] John Peterson, "Sovereignty and Boundaries in the Gulf States: Settling the Peripheries." in Mehran Kamrava (ed.) *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, p. 21.

[59] Jean-Marc Rickli, "New alliances dynamics in the Gulf and their impact on the small GCC states," *Third World Thematics,* vol 1, 2016, pp. 132-150.

These considerations of power differentials can also translate into threats of economic hegemony. The level of economic interconnectedness in the GCC region has developed over the decades to become rather substantial. Having very similar political-economic models, ie rentier systems based on the revenues of exporting energy resources, the compatibility of the GCC countries among themselves is high.[66] However, macroeconomic indicators have long been profoundly different. In particular, some of the GCC countries - like Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait – have a GDP per capita among the highest in the world.[67] Others, like Bahrain and Oman, have staggering GDP-to-debt ratios.[68] The case of Bahrain is particularly illuminating. The combination of a stagnating economy with the sheer volume of young job-seekers entering the labour market every year is a real challenge for Manama. As foreign investors are hesitant to inject liquidity in the country, in the post-Arab Spring context state finances have been depleted by a combination of high expenses on security and political stability. Much of Bahrain's budget, increasingly under strain due to political instability, became dependent on revenues from the Saudi ARAMCO-controlled Abu Saʿfah oil field, and additional financial backing from both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.[69] Incidentally, after 2011 Bahrain has increasingly subscribed to all foreign policy initiatives promoted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE - from the creation of a Gulf Union to the Yemen war - and has consistently toed the Saudi-Emirati line in regional politics.[70]

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[60] 60- Gerd Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy: 'Omnibalancing' and 'Relative Autonomy' in Multiple Environments," in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, New York University Press, 2005, pp. 315–351.

[61] 61- Brahim Saidy. "Qatari-US military relations: context, evolution and prospects." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10.2 (2017): 286-299.

[62] 62- Ibid., p. 289.

[63] 63- An interesting exception to highlight is how the UAE used these opportunities of international cooperation in the security domain to develop a uniquely effective military. For more see David Roberts, "Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World" *Security Studies*, 2020, p. 301-334.

[64] 64- There is a general consensus on this argument that did not change much over time. See for instance Joseph Moynihan, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the United States: Common and Uncommon Security Interests" in Christian Koch and David Long (eds.) *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century*, (IB Tauris, 1996).

[65] 65- Susan Glasser, "The Full Transcript: Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power" Podcast, *The Global Politico*, 15 January 2018, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/15/the-full-transcript-ben-rhodes-and-samantha-power-216322 (accessed 10 April 2020).

[66] 66- Robert Springborg. "GCC Countries as" Rentier States" Revisited." *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 67, No. 2, 2013, pp. 301-309.

Another necessary variable to consider is connected to the porous nature of borders within the GCC. As Gregory Gause effectively described in his *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, the Gulf region includes a multitude of trans-border identities – ethnic, sectarian, tribal, ideological – that connect people from different countries and can be easily exploited to spread any given ideology.[71] These trans-border political identities and the multitude of transnational links, emboldened with every initiative for GCC integration or coordination, have previously enabled mobilization of people across borders in the Gulf region.

A prominent historical example is from the 1980s and, particularly, how easily a wave of Shi'a unrest moved from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia to Kuwait, with revolutionary movements being established among the Shi'a communities in the three countries by individuals of the same network and working to reinforce one another across borders.[72] The Saudi-based Organization of the Islamic Revolution and Hezbollah al-Hijaz, had frequent exchanges with Bahrain-based International Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, and Kuwait's Shiraziyyun.[73] These included financial and logistical support as well as political consultations,

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67- Ibid.

68- Ibid.

69- Eckart Woertz, "Bahrain's Economy: Oil Prices, Economic Diversification, Saudi Support, and Political Uncertainties" *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, 2 October 2018; Glen Carey and Matthew Martin, "In Saudi Shadow, One Troubled Gulf State Seeks an Investor Reset" *Bloomberg*, 26 March 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-26/in-saudi-shadow-one-troubled-gulf-state-seeks-an-investor-reset (accessed 24 November 2018).

70- Mehran Kamrava. "Multipolarity and instability in the Middle East.", *Orbis*, 2018, p. 610.

71- Gause. *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf.*

72- Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, Hurst, 2009, p. 179.

73- Ibid.

training opportunities.

Many more historical references become available by considering the idea that the capacity of an external power to influence politics in other countries can be based not only upon material resources but also, as per constructivist theories, upon ideological power. Focusing on ideologies and identity politics, Barnett wrote that the successful portrayal of a rival model of statual institutions and organising ideologies, that potentially undermined the state's basis of existence, has routinely represented a threat in the region.[74] Ideologies like pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, especially when implying political unification as a way to safeguard the common Arab or Muslim interests could easily be perceived as threats from the point of view of GCC regimes. For instance, Saudi Arabia was notoriously suspicious of Egyptian president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, who, brandishing pan-Arab rhetoric, had inspired the formation between the 1950s and the 1960s of a constellation of nationalist movements responsible for sustained instability in the Arabian Peninsula.[75]

In the post-Arab Spring context, as popular uprisings developed across ideological and identitarian fault lines, ideological threats based on identity politics were discussed again in the literature. For instance Matteo Legrenzi has argued that, while after 2011 the traditional identity dichotomy between pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism has dissolved, sectarian identities have been politicised to the extent that they fuelled new security dilemmas in the Arabian Peninsula.[76] At the same time, ideological and identitarian questions can also cover for simple power politics. Going beyond the idea of sectarianism as an unending, primordial conflict between Sunni and Shi'a, scholars such as Gregory Gause explains sectarianism as a tool of power politics that Gulf regimes employ to balance against both domestic and foreign threats: a part of a game for regional influence that he calls the Middle East New Cold War, rather than a centuries-long inevitable religious dispute.[77]

Whether fundamentally covering for hidden agendas of power politics, or of genuine nature, the indisputable point is that questions of ideology and identity politics move easily and quickly across borders in the Gulf region. A clear-cut case is provided in the more recent context, as satellite television networks started to develop in the GCC. Qatar's Al Jazeera, in particular, due to its huge popularity in the entire MENA region, became a powerful tool to

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74- Michael Barnett. "Institutions, roles, and disorder: The case of the Arab states system." *International Studies Quarterly 37.3, 1993*, pp. 271-296.

75- Ibid.

76- Matteo Legrenzi, and Marina Calculli. "Middle East security: Continuity amid change." in Fawcett (ed), *International Relations of the Middle East,* Oxford University Press, 2013.

77- Gregory Gause III. "Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war." *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 11 (2014), pp. 1-27.

counter dominant narratives and ideologies. [78] As a testimony of how impactful ideological and identitarian questions can be, only a few years after Al Jazeera's establishment in 1996, the channel was the focal point of controversies among the GCC states. In particular, Saudi Arabia protested that Al Jazeera undermined Saudi legitimacy and perhaps even the ideological leadership of the Muslim world by promoting different interpretations of religious ideas.[79] To testify that perceptions, Riyadh withdrew its Ambassador from Doha in 2002 and for six years.

Finally, tribal links – which, by definition, are transnational – have also historically provided the means to project cross-border threats. In 1995, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani took over from his father, whose politics was mostly pro-Saudi, in a bloodless coup. Qatar's neighbours were adamant at the time that Sheikh Khalifa be returned to his position, acutely aware of the challenge represented by Hamad, who had already vowed to disenfranchise Qatar from the Saudi shadows.[80] Saudi Arabia and Bahrain then allegedly supported a counter coup, enlisting dozens of members from the Al Ghufran branch of the Al Murrah tribe, the largest tribe in Qatar and one that has both Qatari and Saudi connections, to overthrow the new Emir.[81] Fast forward to the year 2017, when the most severe intra-GCC crisis erupted, the anti-Qatar quartet interestingly attempted to enlist the same tribal clan as ally. In particular, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman met some leaders of the Al-Murrah tribe in Jeddah in the summer of 2017.[82] Afterwards, tribal leader Sheikh Taleb Bin Lahom Bin Shuraim, who was among those meeting the Saudi Crown Prince, stated in an interview with Dubai-based, Saudi-owned outlet *Al-Arabiya*, that the Qatari authorities had turned Qatar into a 'haven for terrorists and their sponsors'.[83] And in a widely circulated video, a Qatari royal dissident denounced the Qatari Emir before thousands of tribesmen assembled on the Saudi-Qatar border.[84] Consequently, in September 2017, 55 members of the tribe were stripped of Qatari citizenship.[85] However, when speaking about the effectiveness of similar devices, it is also paramount to highlight how in both

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78- David Roberts. *Qatar: Securing the global ambitions of a city-state*. Hurst, 2017.

79- Ibid.

80- Ibid.

81- "Life sentences for Qatari coup plotters", *BBC*, 19 February 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/660887.stm (accessed 21 July 2017)

82- "Qatar: Al-Murrah citizenship revocations" *Gulf States News,* Issue 1044, 21 September 2017, https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/Head+of+Al-Murrah+in+Qatar+loses+citizenship.aspx?date=20170921&docNo=35&qid=2&page=4 (accessed 25 July 2018).

83- "Head of al-Murrah tribe confirms Qatar revokes family's citizenship", *Al Arabiya*, 14 September 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/09/14/Head-of-al-Marri-tribe-confirms-Qatar-revokes-family-s-citizenship.html (accessed 27 July 2018).

84- "Qatar: Al-Murrah citizenship revocations" *Gulf States News*.

85- Ibid.

cases the tribal threat to Qatar never developed existential implications and was managed and contained by the state with relative ease.

From questions of sovereignty concerns to contested borders, from historical rivalries to issues of power asymmetries and economic hegemony, the GCC countries have had to confront significant challenges emerging from their fellow monarchies within the region. The fundamental feature of the region, borders' porosity to people, ideas and movements, has enabled a multitude of trans-national questions to prosper, including many bearing significant security concerns. This excursus and the elements here unpacked corroborate the idea that the GCC region has long fitted the description of a regional security complex, as argued in this article, and that the post-2011 securitisation Interestingly, all of these issues can be explored when looking at the security calculus of the Sultanate of Oman, be it in its history or in contemporary times. The next section of the paper will do precisely that, focusing the attention on how all of the aforementioned questions, in their intra-GCC dimensions, have manifested themselves in Oman.

Case study: Oman and intra-GCC security dynamics.

Muscat, a nonconformist GCC?

Oman is a founding member of the GCC and, as mentioned, was an eager proponent of further security integration within the GCC in the 1990s. At the same time, Oman has long pursued its own autonomous policies within and without the GCC and consistently shown a divergent strategic calculus and security perceptions. These seemingly contradictory trends make Oman a particularly interesting case for the analysis of intra-GCC security dynamics. While this section will further zoom in on Oman's peculiarities, the next section will provide an analytical account of its regional posture in an historical perspective.

Muscat, a unique case among the GCC, has never perceived the Iran as posing an existential threat to its political stability.[86] The rationale was expressed in 1984, when Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Sa'id warned other GCC leaders that 'here in Muscat we do not believe it to be in the interest of security in the Gulf that Iran feels we intend to establish an Arab military pact that will always be hostile to it, or we are about to form a joint force, whose main task is to fight Iran.' [87] Sultan Qaboos' perceptions of Iran was very much the product of the history of interaction between Muscat and Tehran: when Sultan Qaboos was ascending to the throne Iran's Shah offered crucial security assistance to put down a pan-Arab communist rebellion in the south and when the Islamic Revolution swept Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini was adamant to reassure Oman that existing agreements would be respected and relations preserved. [88] This background determined much of the following policies pursued by Muscat. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Muscat refused to support Saddam Hussein, as the rest of the GCC states did, and chose to maintain relations with Tehran, working to help mediate a ceasefire.[89] In the 1990s, Muscat again sought to mediate, this time between Saudi Arabia and Iran.[90] Again in the 2010s - while GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain looked at Iran with increasing suspicion, accusing it of fomenting their domestic Arab Spring chapters – Oman was engaged in facilitating a high-level dialogue between Iran and the United States, which in 2013 - 2015 produced a watershed deal on Iran's nuclear program, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).[91] Oman's fellow GCC states, irked by being kept in the dark on these negotiations, regarded the JCPOA as highly threatening: by paving the way for a normalization of US-Iran ties, they feared it would the prelude to accepting Iran's regional presence, including outside its borders, as legitimate. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, having Iran as part and parcel of the international community, given the power differentials in Tehran's advantage, could create the conditions for a future hegemony of Tehran in the wider MENA region and the Gulf itself. This perspective was further enhanced by the perception, in several GCC capitals, to be already engaged in proxy conflicts for influence with Iran, mainly in Syria – where the Arab Spring descended into a regional proxy war between the Iran-supported regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Sunni opposition – and in Yemen – where Iran-backed rebels known as Houthis had overthrown a government supported by Saudi Arabia on the heels of the Arab Spring. [92] Even in these cases, Oman chose its own path. Muscat was the only GCC state not involved in the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen since 2015 and instead hosted Houthi representatives on several occasions, to facilitate talks with US and Saudi officials. Likewise, in another formidable departure from GCC policies, Oman has never supported the Syrian opposition nor broken diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime.

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[86] Basma Mubarak Saeed. "Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union." *Aljazeera Center for Studies 6 (2014).*

[87] Quoted in Joseph Kechichian, *Oman and the World,* RAND Corporation, 1995, p. 104.

While the disagreements between Oman and the other GCC countries regarding Iran are especially evident, there are a number of other noticeable cases. When Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, and Arab countries rushed

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88- Saeed. "Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union."

89- Kechichian, *Oman and the World,* RAND Corporation, 1995, p. 106

90- Ibid.

91- Abdullah Baabood. "Oman's independent foreign policy." *The Small Gulf States*. Routledge, 2016, pp. 117-132.

92- Ibid.

to take the distance from Cairo, fearing the possible weaponization of the connections to Israel at a peak moment for the popularity of the Palestinian cause across the MENA region, Oman was alone in not breaking relations with Cairo.[93] Similarly, Oman was also the first GCC state to host an Israeli Prime Minister, when Yitzhak Rabin visited the Sultanate in 1994.[94] On another note, Oman refused to join Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE in their measures against Qatar in 2014 – when Ambassadors were withdrawn - and 2017 – with the political boycott and economic embargo.[95] This was despite the fact that, as mentioned, the anti-Qatar camp vehemently presented both episodes as related to their own conception of Gulf security: the Riyadh Agreements, underpinning both crises, are in fact written around the idea that Qatar's foreign policy supporting the Muslim Brotherhood was a threat to the stability of the GCC monarchies. Evidently, Oman, strengthening its economic links with Qatar after the crisis' outbreak in 2017, dis not share the concerns of fellow GCC states on the potential destabilising effect of Qatar's regional policies.

Finally, the fact that Oman was very cautious to maintain its political autonomy vis-à-vis the GCC, is especially proven by it very public disagreement over the establishment of a political union among GCC states. Already in 2006 Oman had stated that it would not join the proposed GCC monetary union, refusing to be tied to monetary policies made elsewhere in the GCC.[96] Its opposition to the political union first proposed by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Arab uprisings, was even clearer. 'We are against a union. We will not prevent a union, but if it happens we will not be part of it,' Omani Foreign Minister Yousuf Bin Alawi said at the 2013 Manama Dialogue in Bahrain.[97] Like other smaller GCC states, Oman feared a loss of sovereignty and increasing domination by Saudi Arabia in the new Union as well as refused to antagonize Iran.

When considering the unique path of Oman in regional politics, it becomes apparent that Oman has rarely aligned with the security calculus of the other GCC monarchies and could hardly be considered a member of a potential GCC security community. However, the next section will examine how that does not at all negate the fact the the Sultanate has historically been fully embroiled in intra-GCC security dynamics. Indeed, the section will examine how Oman has been subjected from several kinds of threats emanating from the intra-GCC space, compatible with the ones exposed in previous sections of this paper.

93- Marc O'Reilly. "Omanibalancing: Oman confronts an uncertain future." *The Middle East Journal*, 1998, pp. 74.

94- Ibid.

95- Bianco and Stansfield. "The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011."

96- Ana Echague "Oman: the outlier." *Policy Brief. ISSN 2667 (1989)*.

97- 'Oman says it opposes union of Gulf states', *AFP*, 7 December 2013.

Finally, it will look into the watershed leadership transition which took place in Muscat in January 2020. Due to Oman's institutional and constitutional realities, the country is highly dependent on the leadership for policy-making.[98] Sultan Qaboos, who established the country in its modern form in 1970 and ruled over it till his death in 2020, was also the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defence.[99] Regarded as the Father of the Nation, Sultan Qaboos centralised state functions onto the individual so largely that his perceptions and his perspectives became the perceptions and perspectives of the state. While the constitutional and instructional parameters remain the same, the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, has only begun to project its impact onto the state. While Sultan Haitham has guaranteed continuity of Oman's regional policies, his individual cognition cannot but be different.[100] Hence, the leadership transition of January 2020, could have a significant impact on Oman's strategic calculus, including vis-à-vis its position in intra-GCC security dynamics.

Oman and intra-GCC security dynamics

Since even before the inception of the Sultanate, Oman has had border disputes with neighbouring modern states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Up until the mid-19th century, when the British Empire established its protectorates in the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultan had *de facto* authority over today's Emirates.[101] After the division of the territories in two sovereign countries, the struggle over territorial sovereignty continued with decades-long open disputes, with Oman having disputes with four of the emirates: with Abu Dhabi over the Buraimi Oasis, with Sharjah over Wadi Madha, with Ras-al-Khaimah over Wadi al Quar and the mountain region, and with Fujairah over some inland areas. A border demarcation agreement between Oman and the UAE was signed only in 1999, and with occasional confrontations until as late as the year 2000.[102] In particular, throughout the decades, tribes from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman have held conflicting views on the sovereignty over the Al Buraimi Oasis. The dispute became alarmingly heated in the 1950, as it spilled over the realm of an armed confrontation, involving tribal politics. The then Sultan of Oman, Said bin Taymur al-Sa'id, claimed that several tribal leaders living in border areas had visited him to pledged their allegiance.[103] Around the same time, the Saudi government also revived its latent claims, and appointed Turki bin Abdullah bin Utaishan as its representative in Buraimi, dispatching him to harness tribal allegiance on behalf of Saudi leaders.[104] The Sultan of Oman then dispatched a large tribal force and only withdrew in response to pressures from the British political agent.[105] Amid this context, British mediation only partially addressed the disputes.[106] While eventually border demarcation agreements were signed between Oman and the UAE and the UAE and Saudi Arabia, sovereignty over the oil-rich Buraimi Oasis is still periodically put into question by one side or the other. A similarly contentious dispute is that over the sovereignty of the Musandam Peninsula, granted to Oman but periodically questioned by the UAE. [107]

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[98] Marc Valeri. *Oman: politics and society in the Qaboos State*. Hurst & Company, 2009.

[99] Ibid.

[100] "Oman's new ruler chosen to provide continuity", *Reuters*, 11 January 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oman-sultan-newsmaker/omans-new-ruler-chosen-to-provide-continuity-idUSKBN-1ZA0KV (accessed a March 2020)

[101] Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, pp. 76-77.

[102] Fatma Al-Sayegh, "The UAE and Oman: Opportunities and Challenges in the Twenty-First Century", *Middle East Policy*, Volume IX, Number 3, Fall 2002.

[103] Ibid.

While the Buraimi question occupied the geopolitical calculations of the Sultan for northern Oman, in the southern region of Dhofar, Sultan Said had to confront a different threat: a rebellion from several groups inspired by Marxist ideology.[108] This rebellion would be quelled only in the 1970s, when the new Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Sa'id would obtain support from Iran, Britain and Jordan and finally quell the fighting. Crucially, several of these groups had formed in Kuwait in the 1960s.[109] For instance, both the Arab Nationalists' Movement and the Dhofari Benevolent Society, as well as al-Kaff al-Aswad, managed to be based in and operate out of Kuwait.[110] The clear perception in Muscat was that Kuwait, where the influence of the pan-Arab socialist ideology was high, was harboring the movements and possibly supporting them. It was this perception that drove Sultan Qaboos to reject Kuwait's assistance, openly stating that Kuwait had solid relations with Oman's enemy, the socialist, Soviet-backed People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in southern Yemen, which in turn actively backed the Dhofar rebellion.[111] As the Sultan regarded the fight against these southern groups as existential, Kuwait's ambiguous positions, considering the noticeable capacity that the country had in boosting capabilities of groups it supported, posed a tangible threat.

Another threat similarly combining the ideological and political element that Sultan Said had to confront was that posed in the interior of the Sultanate by the Imamate. This was a millenary institution ruling over the Omani interior

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104- Ibid.

105- Ibid.

106- Ibid.

107- Peterson, "Sovereignty and Boundaries in the Gulf States: Settling the Peripheries."

108- Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

109- Walid E. Moubarak "The Kuwait Fund in the Context of Arab and Third World Politics Author" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 538-552.

110- Ibid.

111- Ibid.

since around the year 750, led by Ibadi imams who had spiritual and temporal authority over the territories.[112] In 1954, open conflict erupted between Imam Ghalib bin Ali Al Hinai and Sultan Said bin Taimur Al Said, the *casus belli* being over the right to the energy revenues for oil fields in contested territory.[113] As the Imamate forces were initially quickly defeated by the Sultan's forces, with the support of British-led paramilitary groups, Imam Ghalib's brother, Talib bin Ali Al Hinai, retreated to Saudi Arabia. He then formed the Oman Liberation Army, allegedly with support from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and returned to Oman waging a new phase of the guerrilla in 1957.[114] Sultan Said was able to prevail only thanks to a vigorous British support, which included air force, and finally forced the Imamate fighters to surrender their safe haven in the mountainous region of Jebel Akhdar only in 1959.[115] The Imamate was then officially declared over and the Sultan's control was officially extended on the country's interior. However, the Imam and few other supporters fled once again to Saudi Arabia, where they continued to intermittently plot small-scale operations to destabilise the regime.[116] Against this backdrop, the influence of Wahhabism, Saudi clerics and – by extension – the Saudi regime in Oman, was regarded as very problematic, especially between the 1980s and the 1990s as, in the official Omani religious and political discourse, Wahhabism became interchangeable with extremism.[117]

Fast forward to the 2000s and 2010s, intra-GCC security dynamics as seen from Oman acquired another geopolitical layer. The Oman-UAE relations, historically problematic, saw a deterioration since Mohammad bin Zayed, became the UAE's *de facto* leader in 2004. At the end of 2010, Oman's state news agency reported that its 'security services uncovered a spying network belonging to the state security apparatus of the United Arab Emirates, targeting ... Oman and the way its government and military work' and that an undisclosed number of Omani nationals had been arrested, including some who worked for the government.[118] Additionally, the UAE's participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, focusing on the southern region of Al Mahra, bordering Oman, is considered problematic.[119] As Emirati influence in Al Mahra grows, the Omani leadership evaluates the possible spill-overs into the politically-sensitive region of Dhofar.[120] The crisis erupted in 2017 between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on one side and Qatar on the other side, brought the issue of intra-GCC geopolitical competition to a new level. The draconian measures taken against Qatar could have been to coerce Doha into aligning fully with the quartet's regional politics, renouncing its independent stances. A senior Omani official speaking to the press on condition of anonymity in December 2017 said that the dispute was not about Qatar's support for Islamists or Iran, but rather about power and Saudi plans to dominate the Peninsula.[121] As a GCC member which has consistently made foreign policy choices that diverge from those of Saudi Arabia, and as the Gulf monarchy closest to Iran, Oman might become a future target of the same pressure strategy. For example, the Saudis and Emiratis had already accused Muscat in October 2016 of undermining the GCC's collective security by not obstructing the smuggling of Iranian weapons to Yemen's Shia-aligned Houthi rebels fought by Saudi Arabia, an accusation which Oman's Minister Yusuf bin 'Alawi vehemently denied.[122]

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[112] John Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 169-76.

[113] Ibid., p. 182

[114] J. E. Peterson, "Britain and the Oman War: An Arabian Entanglement," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1976

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Khalid Al-Azri, *Social and gender inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition,* Routledge, p. 112

[118] "Oman says uncovers UAE spy ring", *Reuters*, 30 January 2011 https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-oman-emirates-spying-idUKTRE70T13720110130 (accessed 29 May 2018)

In particular, Oman's economic woes have created an imbalance of economic power between the Sultanate on one side and the wealthier GCC neighbours on the other. The World Bank estimates that unemployment among 15-24 year olds in Oman is 49 percent, in the context of a very young population, with at least 60 percent under 30 years old.[123] The growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in real terms turned negative (-0.9%) in 2017 and remained low in 2019 (0.3%).[124] Unable to spur real growth, working with lower oil prices and confronting higher expenditure, Oman has run high budget deficits for years and in 2018 rating agencies Fitch and Standard & Poor's downgraded Oman's credit rating to "junk".[125] The International Monetary Fund expects Oman's debt to reach 61% of GDP by 2020, compared to 17%

119- Ramy Jabbour, "Yemen's Region of Al-Mahra at the intersection of Interests and Competitions", *Middle East Institute for Research and Strategic Studies*, 12 March 2018, http://meirss.org/yemens-region-al-mahra-intersection-interests-competitions/ (accessed 28 May 2018)

120- Interview with an Omani government official, Muscat, 24 April 2018.

121- Joe Gill, "Saudi-UAE pact's aggressive policies could break up GCC: Oman source", *Middle East Eye*, 19 December 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-uae-reckless-policies-could-break-gcc-oman-source-435138828 (accessed 28 May 2018).

122- Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons supply to Yemen's Houthis via Oman - officials", *Reuters*, 20 October 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX, (accessed 20 July 2017).

123- *Oman Economic Outlook*, The World Bank, 2019.

124- Ibid.

125- "Oman Gets Third Junk Rating as Gulf State Struggles With Reforms", Bloomberg, 6 March 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-06/moody-s-cuts-oman-to-junk-amid-lack-of-meaningful-fiscal-reforms (accessed 1 march 2020).

in 2015.[126] These economic and financial vulnerabilities could become an access point for wealthy GCC neighbours disagreeing with Omani policies to exert political pressure on the Sultanate to change its ways. In order to limit the political ramifications of financial assistance, Sultan Qaboos was weary of receiving that from the neighbours. Hence of the approximately USD 20 billions borrowed by the Omani government in 2017, the bulk has come from the Far East rather than from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, who have instead granted a USD 10 billions aid package to Bahrain the following year.[127] Generally speaking, hesitations have often emerged in Oman any time that economic cooperation could impinge on issues of national sovereignty. A clear example is the dispute over the project of a common currency hampered by the resistance of Oman and the United Arab Emirates between 2006 and 2010. Beyond the less prominent issue of the location of the anticipated central bank - that the UAE wanted in Abu Dhabi and not, as proposed, in Riyadh - a GCC monetary union would have impinged on the sovereign matters of the fiscal and monetary policies in ways that the GCC leaders were not comfortable with, especially in Oman.[128] However, with China and other Asian countries increasingly reluctant to play an even bigger role in the Omani financial market, due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on liquidity flows both in Asia and Oman, and rising pressure on the new leadership to tackle economic vulnerabilities and dysfunctionalities, it is likely that wealthy GCC neighbours would be invited to strengthen their partnership with the Sultanate.[129] Pre-existing economic vulnerabilities in the Sultanate have been magnified in 2020 by the combination of the collapse of oil prices and the outburst of a global coronavirus pandemic. As the pandemic, originated in prime oil consumer China, rapidly and substantially decreased global demand for oil, Saudi Arabia reacted by triggering a price war among oil producers that drove the value of a barrel to its lowest point in over 15 years.[130] Having to face burgeoning expenses to contain the spread of the pandemic in the Sultanate and to offset its financial impact over an economy in lockdown, the Sultanate also saw its energy revenues dangerously drying up. Saudi oil politics had a critical impact on the resulting security calculus.

Sultan Haitham thus inherits both the economic vulnerabilities and the sensitive context of regional politics from his predecessor. However he confronts regional polarization from a more delicate position than Sultan Qaboos, who was among the founding members of the GCC and whose seniority commanded deference from the other regional leaders, including the more assertive ones. In addition, Sultan Haitham ascends to the throne as Iran's position in the regional geopolitics is being cornered. With the US withdrawing from the JCPOA in 2018 and re-imposing crippling economic sanctions against the country, Iran resorted to an aggressive behaviour in the region – including for instance an attack against oil tankers off the UAE coast and an alleged attack against two infrastructures of the Saudi energy major ARAMCO in 2019 - and new threats to re-open the nuclear dossier.[131] These dynamics gradually isolated Tehran from the regional and international politics, encouraging players to ostracize Tehran. In turn, Oman's ability to credibly hedge between the two shores of the Gulf, a key element of carving its autonomous space in regional politics, cannot but be affected. The combination of existing, unresolved questions in the intra-GCC security space, possible increased economic dependency on GCC neighbours, the crumbling of the hedging strategy with Iran and a new leadership, would likely result in an even greater embroilment of the Sultanate in the intra-GCC security dynamics of the medium-term future. In this sense, the retirement of Yousuf bin Alawi, the closest Omani official to the Iranian counterparts in August 2020, is a clear signal that these dynamics are already at play.

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[126] 126- Tokhir N Mirzoev et al. “The Future of Oil and Fiscal Sustainability in the GCC Region”, *The International Monetary Fund*, 6 February 2020.

[127] 127- “LPC-Oman raising US$3.6bn from Chinese banks”, *Reuters*, 9 May 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/oman-loans/lpc-oman-raising-us3-6bn-from-chinese-banks-idUSL4N1IB3TW (accessed 6 February 2019); “GCC averts Bahrain debt crisis with $10bn aid package, *Reuters*, 7 October 2018, https://gulfbusiness.com/gcc-averts-bahrain-debt-crisis-10bn-aid-package/ (accessed 6 February 2019).

[128] 128- Partrick. “The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?”

[129] 129- Interviews of the author in Muscat, February 2020.

[130] 130- Nikolay Kozhanov, “Can Saudi Arabia win the oil price war?” *Middle East Institute*, 8 April 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-saudi-arabia-win-oil-price-war, (accessed 10 April 2020).

Conclusions

Certainly, GCC security is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but instead a complex matrix of domestic and regional factors each playing a distinctive role in formulating the definition, categorisation, perception and prioritisation of threats. While acknowledging the many domestic specificities of individual GCC countries - including the diversity of the national fabrics, historical factors, political systems, religious identities, individual leaders, macroeconomic indicators – substantial regional commonalities and bonds play a crucial role in their security agendas. The reticence over defence and security integration, can be explained in a number of ways but, also, through the sensitive history of intra-GCC security relations, impacted by questions of sovereignty, disputes over borders, historical rivalries or hegemonic ambitions based on asymmetries of geopolitical or economic power. The Arab Spring has highlighted growing divergences among the monarchies and exposed

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131- Cinzia Bianco, Saudi Arabia's frozen-conflict tactics, European Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_saudi_arabias_frozen_conflict_tactics (accessed 10 April 2020).

them to additional external pressures pushing the GCC's balance-of-threat off balance and towards securitization. In this sense, the interconnectedness of the GCC monarchies among themselves has been interpreted as enabling a multitude of trans-national security challenges to prosper. Hence, the GCC cannot be defined in contemporary times as a security community. Indeed, it would be more productive to look at the GCC as a regional security complex, i.e., as defined by Barry Buzan, a geographic area in which members perceive one another as possible sources of threat and invest most of their resources and attention worrying about their own neighbours.[132] In fact, members of a complex have intense security interdependence and frequent interactions with said interactions being both positive or negative.[133]

The Sultanate of Oman, as it emerged from the analysis, is clearly a member of such security complex. While legitimately considered an outlier among the GCC monarchies, during the course of its history the Sultanate of Oman has experienced the full range of possible intra-GCC security challenges: from border disputes to ideological threats, and beyond. In particular, looking at the delicate context of the 2020 leadership transition, this analysis found that Oman's new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq al-Sa'id, will be further rather than less absorbed by intra-GCC security dynamics and, in particular, begun his reign confronting potential issues of hegemonic ambitions based on economic vulnerabilities. Magnified in 2020 by the combination of the collapse of oil prices and the outburst of a global pandemic, such vulnerabilities will inevitably impinge on the Sultanate's security calculus. Once again, fellow GCC states, will remain at the epicentre of such calculus.

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[132] Buzan*, People, States and Fear*.

[133] The same Barry Buzan refers to the Persian Gulf as a sub-complex in Ole Weaver and Barry Buzan (eds), *Regions and Power,* Cambridge University Pres, 2003.