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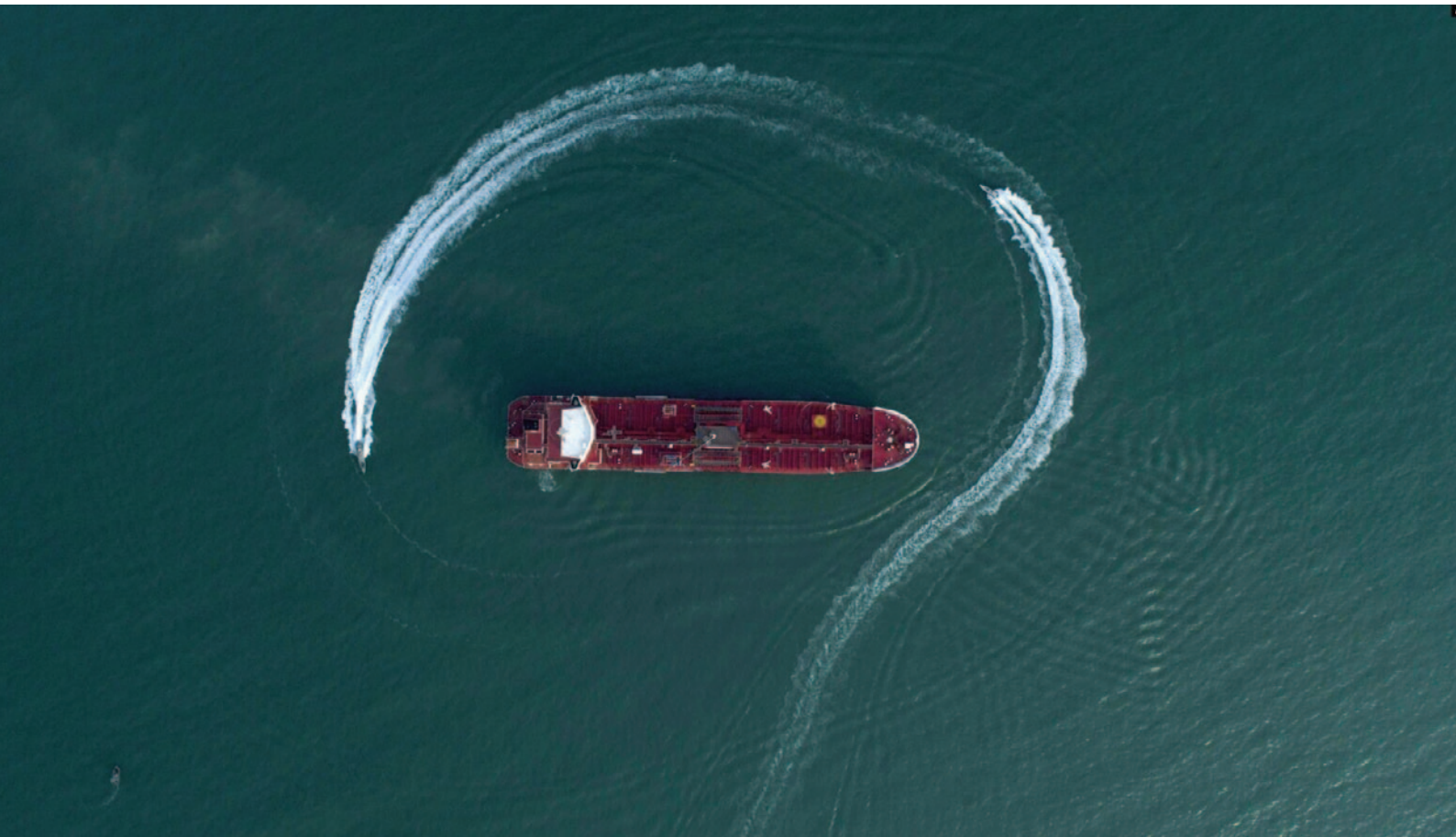
# MEB #42

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## **NEW GULF ORDER?**



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# The role of media in the GCC

## The case of Al Jazeera

The state-regulated media of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are monitoring regional and international diplomatic affairs. Al Jazeera's has been controversial regarding its role as the mouthpiece of Qatar's diplomatic aspirations. The role of media in the GCC has shifted after the Qatar diplomatic crisis of 2017 and the evolving contribution of social media.

**THE POWER OF THE MEDIA** in the Gulf countries is flourishing at the same time that the law framework tightens. The reputation of the royal family and Islamic values, among others, cannot be criticized. The six countries that belong to the Gulf Co-operation Council are powerful autocracies, that have extreme control over the media, and the way news is distributed. All the GCC countries have some restrictions on freedom of the press, according to a number of reports from organizations such as “Reports without Borders” and “Freedom House.” This lack of freedom is reflected throughout several imprisonments, detentions and executions of journalists, or the banning of publications such as books or independent papers that do not get approved by the censorship authorities of each country. In the years following the Arab spring, where the dominant forces of information are the Internet and social media, the way with which people transmit and receive news has changed.

The most widely known network in the region is undoubtedly Al Jazeera, a semi-private Qatari network; its official site states that “Al Jazeera is an independent news organization partly funded by the Qatari government”. The channel’s ambitious goal is to be a free and independent voice and to present a wide variety of subjects to the viewer. Nevertheless, Al Jazeera has been on the receiving end of many international and regional critics regarding its position towards extremism. This criticism occurred when the channel aired a number of controversial interviews and videotapes of Al-Qaida members and Osama Bin Laden in 2009. Further, the channel aired some conservative TV shows like “Sharia and Life”, produced by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric and a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>1</sup>

Based on its semi-private character, the network is part of the public narrative of the political establishment in Doha. In the period of the US invasion of Iraq, the war was fully covered by the network. Although Aljazeera was deliberately silent about the fact that the American warplanes were launching from US military bases located in Qatar, when uttering its opinion.<sup>2</sup> The channel has been also criticized for anti-Semitic rhetoric in the way that it has covered the Palestine-Israeli conflict, even though it was the first Arab channel that gave airtime to Israeli officials.<sup>3</sup> Critics of the network accuse it of biased opinions, and promoting an Islamic agenda by covering Hamas’ and Houthi militia’s activities. The network has seen multiple of its headquarters hit in the Gaza Strip by Israeli rockets in 2021 or closed -in Saudi Arabia in 2017.<sup>4</sup> Further, the latest blow was the killing of the journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli officials.<sup>5</sup>

Through the aforementioned mindset, the channel plays a crucial role in Qatar’s foreign diplomacy. The way that the country enjoys portraying itself in the region and the rest of the world is as a peaceful free-thinking country that embraces freedom of speech and respects diversity. However, freedom of expression is not fully protected in Qatar. Although the constitution protects, at least in theory, the right to free speech and media expression, the “facts on the ground” indicate that this may not be entirely true. In article 136/2020 of the penal code, the government authorizes the imprisonment or the imposition of a fine to “anyone who broadcasts, publishes, or republishes false or biased rumors, with the intent to harm national interests.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, journalists are required to follow some guidelines on religious and political matters, such as the coverage of the Emir’s personal life, women’s rights, LGBT rights and so forth.<sup>7</sup>



As an outcome of these red lines, many journalists self-censor their work. It is prominent that between the English and the Arabic channel, there are some differences in the diversity of the content. The English one is more sensitive towards political figures of other governments, such as Saudi Arabia, the US and Israel. Although both English and Arabic channels strongly avoid covering Qatar's rulers and generally domestic issues in a critical manner.

On June 5, 2017, after many years of condemnation and opposition towards the network's broadcasting opinion, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt imposed sanctions towards Qatar, blocking its only land border and immediately stopping all the imports and exports. Saudi Arabia also closed Al Jazeera's offices and withdrew its broadcast license.<sup>8</sup> This blockade shaped Al Jazeera's broadcasting style when covering subjects related to the countries that imposed these sanctions. The Qatari channel covered the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi thoroughly in 2018 by the Saudi royal family and Saudi officials in the country's embassy in Istanbul. After three and a half years of blockade, the countries restored diplomatic relations in 2021. In those years, other channels like the Saudi "Al Arabiya" had the opportunity to attract part of their audience, but the content of their networks was heavily monitored and doctored by their governments. In the UAE, the National Media Council, which the president appoints, licenses all publications and issues press credentials to editors. Laws control press content and proscribe subjects.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to Internet content, service providers like Etisalat and Du, are required to exclude pornographic material, fraud, drugs, illegal communication services and terrorism offences against the UAE.<sup>10</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, where the most viewed channels are Al Arabiya and MBC –they both belong to the Middle East Broadcasting Center- the way that the government controls the media shares the same values to that of the UAE government. The "Basic Law" of Saudi Arabia does not protect freedom of expression; on the contrary, articles 39 and 12 deny basic rights and freedoms, asserting, for example, that "the state will prevent anything that may lead on disunity, sedition and separation." Most notably, a 2003 law, which refers to media publications, prohibits the publication of anything that is not in the frame of Sharia law.<sup>11</sup> The Ministry of Culture and Education is strategically positioned to overlook the public and private media broadcasting in the country. Social media and VPN providers are also monitored in the GCC. The power of the Internet and social media in the Gulf is flourishing. People have access to more information online, despite state monitoring. More than 95 percent of the total population of the 55 million residents are using social media for their communication and information. This new form of media has changed the way in which the media market operates and, through that, impacts diplomatic relations in the region. After the diplomatic crisis of 2017 to 2021, Qatar continues to seek relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional opposition. In May 2022, the two countries signed agreements in multiple fields.<sup>12</sup> Egypt and Qatar also signed economic deals regarding the growth of the Gaza Strip at the end of 2021 and after the blockade ended.



To conclude, Al Jazeera continues to be controversial as the channel covers UAE airstrikes in Yemen and the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan's leadership. The power of media networks is deeply political. It unfolds the image-making of the country towards the region, while the use of the Internet and social media has brought people even closer to the message itself.

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# The Gulf-Iran relations in a limbo

Between rapprochement, Israel and extra-regional developments

The recently rekindled relationship between Iran and the Gulf states is often affected by the countries' conflicting regional policies, such as those on Israel and the Yemen war, decisions by extra-regional actors – mainly the U.S. – and geostrategic developments taking place in the wider region. The so-called Gulf détente that was initiated in April 2021 and enabled a dialogue between Tehran and Riyadh has only been enhanced by the U.S. decision to withdraw from the region, leaving its strategic Gulf allies feeling rather insecure. This uncertainty increased further when the war in Ukraine broke out and the U.S., once again, appeared rather unwilling to interfere in matters beyond its strategic interests. Despite that, rapprochement is still hindered by the increased contacts between Gulf states and Israel in a period during which Tel-Aviv-Tehran relations are entering a new phase of intensity.

**THE FIRST ROUND** Saudi-Iranian talks held in Baghdad in April 2021 only marked the beginning of a new era in the relations between the two bitter foes of the Gulf. Even though the motive behind the first round of talks revolved around the Yemeni issue and the Saudi intention to disengage from its (then) 6-year-old costly commitment to the conflict, Iran's goals were related to the cultivation of better relations with its Gulf counterpart in an effort to relieve itself from the dire effects of Western sanctions to the socio-economic situation in the country. These initial efforts were then enhanced by both domestic and regional developments that favored rapprochement as a potential solution to the challenges the two countries were facing. For Saudi Arabia, reaching out to Iran gained momentum as Washington shifted its focus towards the East with its infamous strategy of a "pivot to Asia" that was also endorsed by the country's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.<sup>1</sup> It was now obvious to the Saudis that U.S. priorities had significantly shifted as the growing role of China and the importance of the Pacific region had downplayed the significance of the troubled and more multi-polar Middle East.

On the side of Tehran, the newly-elected President of the Islamic Republic adopted a strategy of cooperation by enhancing relations with the neighboring states as he was met with popular dissent and worsening economic circumstances that could disrupt stability in the country and his personal ambitions to claim the role of the Supreme Leader in the near future. Thus, this shift towards détente was aimed at pacifying Iranians that stood against the costly regional ventures of the regime. Even more, this policy was enhanced in a period in which the lack of interest amongst Americans, gave space to Tehran to promote more regionalized security structures without the involvement of outsiders. Even though Iran appears more eager to strengthen its ties with its neighbors, even by reopening the country's OIC office and embassy in Saudi Arabia, this view is not shared by the entirety of the Iranian elite. Raisi's moderate approach is being overshadowed by the growing rhetoric on the "institutionalization" of the Axis of Resistance, with the formation of more permanent structures of Iranian-backed organizations in states such as Iraq. For the time being, the regime's shift can be described as mainly tactical, rather than strategic, as both traditional forces and the Iranian leadership itself have not yet abandoned their regional ambitions and continue fueling tensions and supporting their proxy allies.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the rapprochement policy was mainly aimed at mending fences with the Saudis, the Tehran regime also turned to other Gulf states, with which it already maintained a relatively good level of relations and could promote its cooperation agenda.<sup>3</sup>



One of these countries was Qatar, which Iran had supported during the blockade imposed on the country by its GCC counterparts and Egypt in 2017. Raisi paid a visit to Doha, the first by an Iranian president in 11 years, and the two sides signed 14 memoranda in areas such as aviation, trade, shipping, electricity etc. This cooperation entailed further mutual benefits, as Tehran viewed Qatar as a "Trojan Horse" that could help improve its relations with other Gulf states, while Doha was more than keen to increase its regional status by taking up the role





of a mediator not only with the Gulf states, but also with the U.S. regarding the revival of the JCPOA.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Oman and Iran signed several memoranda of understanding, touching upon issues such as oil, gas, transportation investments etc., also in the presence of the Iranian President.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, Iran and its Gulf counterparts reiterated their commitment to enhancing regional cooperation and bilateral ties, pointing towards the beginning of a new era for their vis-à-vis relations.

However, not all Gulf states are able to portray such a positive shift in their relations with Tehran. The relationship between Iran and the U.A.E. is a rather complex one and is mainly affected by the significant involvement of the latter in the Yemeni civil war. Even though Raisi's rapprochement policy led to a meeting between Iranian and Emirati officials in December 2021, bilateral relations were later affected by the Operation Yemen Storm launched by the Houthis against U.A.E. targets in January of the next year. The drone and missile attacks ignited tensions that not only led to the postponement of a visit to the U.A.E. by President Raisi, but also created an opportunity for Israel to express its support to the Emiratis, further hindering possible rapprochement efforts.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from regional issues, developments on an international level also had a significant impact on Gulf-Iranian détente. Washington's stand-by reaction to the war in Ukraine, along with its limited efforts to defend the Gulf states facing Iranian challenges, such as Houthi attacks in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., signaled towards the need for cooperation and solutions from within the region. The so-called "historic low" in the relations between the Saudis and the Americans, along with renewed U.S. efforts to revive a nuclear deal with Iran, led the Saudis to distance themselves from their Western ally and seek new ways of containing Iranian hegemonic ambitions. Even though results from these efforts seem to be limited to low-level strategic issues and are not concerning foreign policy, the recent truce achieved in the Yemeni civil conflict proves that there is some progress in their vis-à-vis relations, while both sides are open to extending cooperation to a foreign policy level.<sup>7</sup>

Despite that, there are still important aspects in the relationship between Iran and the Gulf states, hindering rapprochement and creating mutual suspicion and tension. The most significant factor can be traced back to another process taking place simultaneously in the region – that of the Abraham Accords and the establishment of diplomatic relations between certain Gulf states and Israel. The initiative of the Trump Presidency that allowed Israel to sign treaties with Bahrain, the U.A.E. and Morocco paved the way for further cooperation between Gulf states and Tel Aviv. These rapprochement efforts were largely designed to counter Iranian threats in the region and despite Gulf-Iranian détente, they continue to pose a challenge to Tehran. Recently, Israel hosted the Foreign Ministers of the U.A.E. and Bahrain in the Negev Summit, where Tel Aviv signed a defense agreement with Manama. This Agreement was, in fact, presented by Israeli media as "proof" of an anti-Iranian alliance forming in the region.<sup>8</sup> During this period, Israel also participated in a U.S. naval exercise, along Saudi Arabia and Oman, two countries that are not part of the Abraham Accords, demonstrating that there is an aspect of further cooperation with these Gulf states as well.<sup>9</sup> This development comes as tension between Israel and Iran is building up even further, following the assassination of Quds Force Col. Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, allegedly by Mossad members in Iranian soil.<sup>10</sup> This direct challenge indicates that Israel is willing to escalate the rivalry with Tehran, igniting instability across the region and troubling Gulf states that aim to maintain a working level of relations with both sides.



It is thus evident that détente with Gulf states will largely be defined by external factors that include U.S. interests, Israeli-Gulf rapprochement and mutual distrust between the two sides. The twofold process Gulf states have initiated by seeking to build bridges both with Tehran and Tel Aviv cannot be deemed sustainable in the long run – at least not as long as Iran and Israel continue to face-off each other across the region. At some point, Gulf states will need to make a conscious choice on their alliances, while Iran will also need to understand the limits of a rapprochement policy that is coupled up with supporting proxy forces in several operational theatres. These trends are set to define the Gulf-Iranian relations for the foreseeable future and affect any further attempts for co-operation.

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# THE ARAB WORLD AND THE GULF

regional politics, investments for the future and quid pro quibus

Stavros Drakoularakos

The developments following the 2011 Arab uprisings prompted the Gulf countries to re-evaluate their relationships with countries in varying degrees of turmoil such as Syria, Libya, Iraq and Egypt. However, the Gulf does not always present a unified front in terms of foreign policy. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are sometimes independently spearheading initiatives, while regional priorities and economic engagements diverge according to their antagonism with Iran and the ever-fluctuating regional presence of the US.

**D**URING PREVIOUS DECADES, Gulf involvement in Middle Eastern affairs was traditionally focused on funding projects and providing aid, often in periods of economic downturn, rather than engaging as foreign policy actors. However, the impact of the US war on terror and the Arab uprisings, coupled with the US ambivalence towards its future presence in the Middle East and policy towards Iran prompted the Gulf to opt for a more autonomous foreign policy addressing pressing matters related to the region.<sup>1</sup> This rapprochement is predominantly transactional, as the countries in question stand to gain financially and diplomatically in return for a rapprochement with the Gulf. The renewed focus of the Gulf countries on Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya seems to be driven by three interrelated narratives: first, to use the new relationship with Israel as an impetus for crafting future opportunities; second, to establish long-term relationships via investments in the countries' economic development; third, to lend further credence to the Gulf as a viable broker for regional issues.

The first narrative was established via the 2020 Abraham Accords between the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and Israel. By setting aside the Palestinian question, the UAE spearheaded the 2020 initiative with which they would attempt to assert their leading role in the Middle East by inaugurating diplomatic relations, establishing a free trade agreement and cultivating intelligence ties with the closest US ally in the region and Iran's prime adversary. Although the expected domino effect with regards to other Gulf countries joining the Accords has not yet been realised, informal business ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel have started with the lifting of the visa ban on Israeli citizens. Moreover, the Abraham Accords present additional prospects for furthering military and security cooperation with countries such as Egypt or Jordan that had already normalised relations with Israel.<sup>2</sup> The relations between Egypt and the Gulf countries grew since the 2013 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood, with the Gulf injecting the Egyptian economy with tens of billions of dollars. The impact of the Abraham Accords and the closer relationship with the Gulf were reflected in 2017 with the transfer of the Tiran and Sanafir islands – under Egyptian administration since 1950 – to Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup>

Lending credence to the second narrative, 2022 marked a new era of financial help from the Gulf to Egypt, as 22 billion dollars – from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – were promised to the Sisi government as investments in the Egyptian economy in order to help Cairo deal with the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the food shortages due to the Ukraine war. This also marked a policy change for Qatar, which had refrained from ties with Sisi due to its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2003 US war on terror, Iraq ultimately found itself inching closer to Iran's sphere of influence and navigating through periods of turmoil related to radical Islam and sectarian strife. Nonetheless, during the past year, Saudi Arabia has been taking the lead in brokering talks with Iran and reconnecting the Iraqi economy with the Gulf. During 2021, Baghdad has appeared more primed than ever before to re-establish healthy relations with Saudi Arabia – despite the presence of Iranian loyalists in the Iraqi political arena. Connecting to the Gulf's electricity grid would enable Baghdad to forge a more autonomous domestic and foreign policy removed from Tehran's influence. Hence, memoranda of understanding have been signed, in addition to Baghdad repaying its war reparations debt to Kuwait from the 1991 annexation, as well as reopening the Iraqi-Saudi border and their embassies after three decades.<sup>5</sup> What is more, Saudi Arabia seems keener than before to establish its clout in Iraq in order to counter Iranian influence



in the country and restore the fragile political balance which was destabilised by the US withdrawal. Due to its geographical position, Iraq presents itself as the ideal neutral meeting place wherein Iran and Saudi Arabia can hold talks concerning shared Middle Eastern issues. As such, Iraq visualises itself as an impartial broker – as opposed to a proxy battleground – immune to escalating tensions between regional hegemonies.<sup>6</sup>

The third narrative is encapsulated in the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Libyan civil war and in their political rapprochement with Egypt during the previous decade. Although at first siding with Haftar against the Sarraj government, the UAE, independently from Saudi Arabia, have opted to support the provisional Government of National Unity, forsaking previous policies and opting for a resolution which could potentially accommodate all involved parties. The latter is indicative of the rapprochement between the UAE and Turkey and the recent Emirati financial help to the dwindling Turkish economy.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in 2021, Egypt and Saudi Arabia signed a joint statement for cooperation in fostering regional security and stability.<sup>8</sup> Hence, Egypt also acts as a liaison for developing ties between other Arab countries and the Gulf. For instance, Tunisian President Saïed turned to Sisi for mediation to ensure economic help from the Gulf, while Saudi Arabia is involved in the negotiations between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia related to the water politics of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, fixing ties with Assad and restoring Syria's membership in the Arab League appears to be the next step in countering Iranian influence in the Levant, as well as furthering Gulf leverage. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are working towards this endgame, with Qatar – as the odd man out – refusing to accept Assad remaining in place. In 2018, six years after the Gulf countries recalled their ambassadors from Syria, both UAE and Bahrain reopened their embassies and Oman followed suit in 2020. The relaunching of Syrian commercial flights to Dubai in 2021 highlighted the Emirates' willingness to legitimize Assad in the eyes of both the Arab world and the West. In many ways, the Gulf countries are repositioning themselves for a future political settlement in Syria. They consider that the civil war has ended in favour of a less isolated Assad and are in the process of building a mutually beneficial relationship. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia has not yet re-established diplomatic relations with Syria, bans are unceremoniously being lifted. Hence, a Syrian-made wartime drama was recently broadcast on Saudi television networks, while trade started increasing again after a decade of stagnation. Furthermore, Syria's tourism minister visited Saudi Arabia in 2021 and one year later, in March 2022, Assad made his first visit to the Gulf – the UAE in particular – since 2012.<sup>10</sup>

With regional change potentially in the air, Assad – as a prime example of the Gulf's new policies – faces a dilemma which could shift the power dynamics in the region: on the one hand, his relationship with Iran and Russia have ensured his stay in power; on the other, his traditional allies are unable to fund the future reconstruction of Syria, while the Gulf countries are more than capable of handling it – but not with-



out a significant trade-off in terms of economic and political leverage. The latter reflects the transactional nature of the Gulf's refocused engagement in the Middle East, with quid pro quibus being the name of the regional hegemon game.

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# UAE

Human rights violations, dual foreign policy  
and the domestic power play



Eirini Giannopoulou

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the most powerful economies in the Middle East, rich in natural reserves and active in other profitable sectors. There is more to this than meets the eye. This article presents the less discussed aspects of UAE; socioeconomic disparities, human rights violations, the domestic power play and the military shift in its foreign policy.

**UAE'S STRONG ECONOMY** has given the country confidence to shape its own proactive foreign policy strategy in the Middle East and abroad. Up until 2004, the UAE's foreign policy was centered around the protection of the country's ability to attract investment and, therefore, focused on soft power politics, such as peacekeeping operations and foreign aid.<sup>1</sup> After the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, UAE has conducted a dual strategy in its foreign policy. On the one hand, it has expanded its diplomatic and economic ties, while strengthening relations with the US, Russia, China, India and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel and Egypt. It sought to portray itself as a new leading force in the region as well as a peace-broker and mediator. It seems that Emirates successfully carved its own foreign policy, distinct from the remaining Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Such an example was the UAE-Israel deal. The 2020 Abraham Accords was an unprecedented event, which also led to further enhancement of relations with the US, leading to the signing of important weapons deals. Notably, in its effort to reshape its foreign policy and enhance its regional role, UAE extended its hand to Iran, Turkey and Qatar, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, so as to boost the economy.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, there has been a steady increase in the militarization of its foreign policy. This interventionist strategy seems to be significantly engineered by the current President, Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, in 2011, the UAE sent a task force to Bahrain, while it had also actively participated in Libya's no-fly zone. Furthermore, the UAE deployed troops in the Yemeni civil war and increased its focus on the tackling of ISIS and other Islamist cells in the Arab Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. This active participation in military matters led by Abu Dhabi could pose a threat to Dubai's already shaky economic activity, which is not based on oil and is in dire need of stability in order to operate unopposed. It is worth mentioning that the Emirati army is very closely cooperating with the private military sector, with the country having worked with private mercenaries in risky external missions, such as the tackling of piracy in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>4</sup> This active military participation in the region was led by Abu Dhabi, disturbing the already fragile balance of power and domestic cohesion among the seven Emirates and, specifically, between Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

While Sharjah focuses on industry and manufacturing, Ras Al Khaimah on trade and tourism, Ajman on construction and real estate, Umm Al Quwain on fishing exports, both Abu Dhabi and Dubai have an accumulation of wealth and high economic activity, rendering them the two largest and most densely populated Emirates. It is important to mention that they are ruled by two prominent families, the former is ruled by Zayid Al Nahyan family and particularly, the current President of UAE, who has been the de facto ruler since 2014, due to his brother's illness. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum has been Prime Minister and Vice-President of the UAE and ruler of the Dubai Emirate since 2006. UAE's capital is the epicenter of petroleum and natural gas reserves in the UAE (and seventh worldwide), rendering it significantly more prosperous than the others. Dubai's economy, on the other hand, is based on banking and finance services, tourism, real estate and construction. Thus, it was susceptible to the global financial crisis of 2008. Against this backdrop, Abu Dhabi offered a 10 billion dollars bailout to Dubai in 2009, which centralized power in Bin Zayed.<sup>5</sup>

The country's rich and vast oil and gas reserves have been the primary source of its wealth for the past decades, rendering the





UAE one of the most prominent economies in the Middle East and worldwide. The limited hydrocarbon reserves have enforced the country's strategy of broadening its economic activity in other sectors, such as construction and manufacturing, aviation, international football, luxury tourism, real estate, and external investment activities, such as agricultural projects in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, UAE set new initiatives in the (commercial) nuclear power sector in order to boost its electricity capacity.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, the country's GDP exceeded 400 billion US dollars (lately showcasing a slight decrease in its rate due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Despite such wealth and economic activity, the socioeconomic gap in the country is clear, with the prominent Emirati families, consisting of just 1 percent of the population, accumulating more than 50 percent of the total annual national wealth. Due to the state-control of the media, information about poverty in the UAE is limited. However, 20 percent of the population is estimated to be living under the poverty line, mainly immigrants from developing countries, working under brutal conditions while receiving low salaries and facing issues such as water insecurity and food scarcity.<sup>8</sup>

Even though, the focus has been traditionally on the country's remarkable economic development since the 1970s, transforming from a deserted land mass into a modernized international investment hub, little light has been shed on the domestic affairs of the Emirati federal monarchy, especially when it comes to the socioeconomic situation and the various human rights violations. The most common human rights violations in the UAE, according to Amnesty International, include arbitrary detentions, inhumane and cruel mistreatment of detainees, strict control of the political discourse, censorship of freedom of speech, vast surveillance of individuals (through the Israeli Pegasus platform), severe discrimination against women and unfairness towards the immigrant population of the country (which makes up for almost 90 percent of the total population), while the death penalty remains legal and relatively active.<sup>9</sup> One of the most prominent cases of maltreatment and censorship in the UAE is the Mansoor case. Ahmed Mansoor, a social media activist for the protection of human rights in the UAE, was arrested twice in the past decade with accusations of publishing false and misleading information and threatening public order. He has called out the authorities for arbitrary arrest, torture and cruel treatment, and deprivation of fundamental rights.<sup>10</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, a significant number within the Emirati civil society have been exposed to such policies.

In conclusion, UAE's regional and federal authorities are primarily focused on economic development and establishing an influential regional role both via hard and soft power. However, there is little talk and less action to tackle human rights violations and shorten the socioeconomic cleavage. The new President Bin Zayed may lead to certain changes in terms of foreign and economic policies and domestic power attribution, but, unfortunately, ameliorations for the quality of life of the majority of the population in the UAE do not seem to be a priority for the Emirati government.



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Christina Chatzitheodorou

With dwindling oil earnings, Saudi Arabia has been forced to consider diversifying its economy by making Riyadh appealing to global investors – an awkward balance that threatens the stability of the current social contract. Understanding the nature and importance of this social contract is critical because it has consequences for the kind of policy changes that are necessary related to the economy, the army and the state's identity.<sup>1</sup> This article will focus on these three aspects of the Vision 2030: diversification of its economy, the army, and the ambivalence of the Kingdom towards a more moderate Islam.

# SAUDI ARABIA



and its vision  
for a Post-Oil  
Future

**S**AUDI ARABIA, like the other Gulf countries, is sometimes characterized as a 'rentier state,' in which rulers may effectively purchase loyalty, or at least political acquiescence, via a political economy model in which unearned riches are distributed to their populace. Saudi Arabia's ability to do that is related to its oil revenues. On March 3, 1938, petroleum was found, and the country has since become one of the world's top producers and exporters of oil. The latter is the world's largest oil exporter, with 90 per cent of its revenue deriving from oil. The Kingdom has used this wealth to improve the lives of its population and build infrastructure. Nonetheless, rulers and citizens of the Kingdom have come to terms with their post-oil future and the need for adaptation to this new reality. In 2021, fiscal challenges caused by the collapse in oil prices during the global lockdowns due to COVID-19 had heightened scrutiny of the region's economic models, which are based on extremely low taxes, substantial subsidies, and extensive public sectors. It is inevitable that the transition from an oil-based to a post-oil economy will impact the social contract between the government and Saudi citizens. In this direction, the Kingdom has launched an ambitious program known as Vision 2030 with the aim of diversifying its economy and strengthening its fiscal position in the face of reduced oil prices.<sup>2</sup>

There are numerous aspects to reducing this reliance on oil. To begin with, it entails replacing oil and gas production with the manufacture of products and services that are not reliant on the oil and gas industry. It also requires replacing government earnings from oil and gas with revenues from other sources, such as consumer taxes and non-oil businesses, but not to the point that these new sectors become restricted and uncompetitive. Thus, for economic diversification to work, additional crucial elements such as reduced government expenditure, increased non-oil exports, and more foreign direct investment (FDI) are required.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, both the Saudi government's Vision and the accompanying National Transformation Program 2020 emphasize the need for economic diversification via the growth of the knowledge sector. Saudi Arabia seeks to develop a high-tech knowledge economy, but this requires a level of expertise and research facilities that are in low supply. The centerpiece of Vision 2030, and possibly the Crown Prince's, Mohammad bin Salman, most ambitious project, resembles a science-fiction scenario. The purpose of this future metropolis, which will run a wide range of hard technologies, from artificial intelligence to robotics, is to entice international investment in the post-oil Saudi economy. This ambitious project has been dubbed NEOM after the Greek term for new, "neo," and the Arabic word for future, "mustaqbal". Its name aims to provide a vision of what a New Future may look like; the Prince's project, powered entirely by renewable energy sources, will act as the hub for a slew of new industries in Saudi Arabia, including biotech, food, healthcare, energy, and technology. Neom's biggest problem is its investment strategy; the Kingdom needs to prove its capacity to offer financial liquidity as well as the prospect of drawing massive investment possibilities and a desired lifestyle. Naturally, securing tangible financing will be challenging at this early stage since there is minimal proof of how the concept will materialize.<sup>4</sup>

The military sector is also part of the Vision 2030 for a post-oil future; the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) and Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) have eleven years to guarantee that 50 per cent of new military equipment is manufactured in-country. Mohammad bin Salman has commented that Saudi Arabia is the third biggest importer of defense and military



equipment, but that just 2 per cent of this equipment is produced locally. Given that the huge amount of money spent on defense has shown no signs of stopping, as part of its offset agreements with Western defense and non-defense sector suppliers, the Kingdom aims to take a more serious approach to assure in-country manufacturing capabilities and knowledge transfer. Up until now, military expenditures were used as a way for the Saudi elite and the Western arms industry to get more petrodollars. Indeed, Saudi defense spending did more to strengthen its political and diplomatic ties with the West, especially the US, than to improve the performance of its military.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the changes in the military sector, Ibn Salman's role as Minister of Defense enabled him to ensure continuous allegiance of the military to the al-Saud- and particularly to his own vision for the country. In Saudi Arabia, unlike other newly formed states following the First World War (i.e., Iran and Iraq), no creation of a national army took place following its establishment in 1932. Military growth was paid for by oil revenues granted by a foreign concession, while enlistment remained voluntary, avoiding the administrative centralization and bureaucratic rationale necessary by conscription. As a result, both the implementation of conscription and the formation of a professional officer corps were compromised in order to preserve the al-tribal Saud's and familial hegemony. Saudi Arabia started the twenty-first century having undergone military modernisation in reverse, with the tribe and familial connections and patronage not eroded but rather rooted much more firmly inside a patrimonial power structure.<sup>6</sup>

Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 concept of forced-pace modernization goes beyond just economic improvements. To appeal to Western governments, businesses, and religious circles and to project an image of tolerance, modernism, and conscientious social changes, a soft power strategy was also proposed. He promises a return to a moderate Islam that promotes equality and cooperation rather than the sectarianism that has for decades impeded societal cohesiveness in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the Prince wants to change people's ideas about what it means to be a Saudi citizen as part of the Vision 2030 project. As a result, the crown prince has tried to move Saudi national identity away from the religious realm. The country's governing system has been going through a rapid transformation: its theological ideology is no longer "blindly" wedded to the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The objectives for these reforms seem to be clear; increasing state centralization; elimination of barriers to anticipated political, social, and economic developments; and regime consolidation. A discussion over moderate Islam raises the question regarding the Kingdom's approach towards the Shias in Saudi Arabia. In 2018, the Prince told *The Atlantic*, "Shiites are living normally in Saudi Arabia. The



Shiites are not a problem for us. We don't agree with the way the Iranian government thinks.”<sup>7</sup> Some small steps have been taken toward this goal, like shutting down TV stations that aired anti-Shia speeches by Sunni Salafist clerics who spoke for decades, and giving citizenship to prominent Shias, like the Lebanese scholar Mohammed al-Husseini, in late 2021.<sup>8</sup>

However, things have been more complicated in the Kingdom over the past few years. Since Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, when the power balance in the region shifted in favour of Iran, Saudi Arabia has seen the world through the lens of Iran and Shia Islam. This prism changes how it sees its neighbor across the Gulf, its place in the Arab and Islamic world, and its own Shiite population. Saudi Arabia has persecuted and looked down on them under the narrative that Iran has hired them to try to overthrow the Saudi government.<sup>9</sup> To this end, the Kingdom has sought to present the Shia community as an Iranian fifth column, which has been used as a justification for sectarian incitement and discrimination towards them.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, the leadership has tried to move away from the previous sectarianism by emphasizing that Saudi Arabia has now entered a new period in which people must contribute to the welfare of the nation, rather than just collecting benefits as their ancestors did. In this respect, much will rely on how much religious freedom Vision 2030 will allow and how the ultra-conservative religious establishment responds.<sup>11</sup> It seems that the Prince is gaining support among individuals of his own generation, who make up a big majority of the Kingdom's inhabitants (50 per cent of Saudi Arabia's population is under 25), and who want to see change. Nonetheless, the Prince's effort is a work in progress, and as the treatment of al-Ouda and other conservative clergy shows, it has not been without difficulties. Even the more moderate members of the royal family are unlikely to want to accelerate reform at the risk of alienating the clerical establishment. The Prince has the burden of evidence; failure to carry out the plan would affect not only his image and prospects of becoming king, but it will also worsen the Kingdom's economic crisis and lead to internal turmoil.<sup>12</sup>

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## THE DRIVERS OF QATARI DOMESTIC 'MODERNIZATION'

a case of outward branding  
and inward evolution

Ilias Mitrousis

Despite being one of the smallest Middle Eastern countries -second only to Bahrain- Qatar has in the last twenty years steadily steered its course to become one of the most influential powerbrokers in the region. However, in accordance with its actions and interactions in the international arena, certain dynamics have been developed that influence its domestic environment, irrespective of how stable and prosperous this policy is.



**T**HE AL THANI RULING FAMILY'S DOMINANCE over Qatari politics has been virtually uncontested for the past twenty-five years. The former Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani had solidified his regime's security through the extensive co-optation of domestic actors and the creation of deep clientelist networks within the society. The country's enormous wealth from energy exports has been the principal enabler of Hamad's co-opting strategies, parallel to the maintenance of a prosperous universal welfare state that largely keeps Qataris away from economic grievances. Furthermore, a particularly centralized, cohesive, and agile decision-making apparatus succeeds in minimizing frictions both within the ruling elites and the Qatari society. In essence, Qatar remains a royal autocracy where surveillance and coercion are also used when deemed necessary. Yet, as Qatari citizens comprise a little more than ten percent of the population, and given the country's wealth, the rentier character of the state, and the absence of any particular sectarian differences, keeping such a small national base content is probably not an uphill task.<sup>1</sup>

Having secured domestic tranquillity, Qatari rulers are also aware that geography does not favour them as they are surrounded by hegemonic regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, and to a lesser extent, the UAE. Being highly ambitious themselves, the Al Thanis have for the past twenty years focused on establishing Qatar as a highly influential player regionally and globally. Although lacking the means of hard power, Qatar opted to develop its international clout on three fronts. Firstly, through the establishment of the Al Jazeera network in 1996, Doha attempted to make a name as the pioneer of dialogue and free speech in the Arab world. Secondly, through several successful mediation efforts, for instance, in Lebanon in 2008, Eritrea in 2010, and Sudan in 2011, it achieved to promote its reputation as an international mediator. The adoption of a 'neutral' diplomatic profile also has allowed Qatar to talk with everybody on the international stage, hence hedging its bets against attempts by other powers to strongarm it into compliance with foreign interests. And thirdly, through aggressive international investments, Doha reinforces its economic and political relationships with other countries. Spain and the UK have been the latest examples, with the Emir pledging 5bn and 10bn, respectively.<sup>2</sup> At this junction, Qatar's investment in football deserves special mention. The sponsoring or the acquisition of major European football clubs, such as Barcelona or Paris Saint Germain, has enabled Qatar to culturally penetrate European countries and brand its name even to large masses of sports fans. More importantly, Qatar has managed to significantly entrench itself into important European economies. The heavy investment in football clubs has the effect of scaling up all the satellite industries, thus magnifying local and international corporate profits, and adding to Qatar's strong international visibility. Along the same line, Qatar's successful bid to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022 serves to expand its international soft power and shaping a positive image abroad.<sup>3</sup> However, in the process of building and maintaining its reputation, the country's elite becomes more prone to outer influences that act as drivers toward domestic evolution and reform.



Since the announcement that Qatar would host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, the country's egregious performance on labor rights came under the spotlight. The 'kafala' regime that regulates migrant workers' status came under heavy international criticism for officially denying fundamental rights. Mounting criticism is something that Qatar cannot afford as it contradicts its branding efforts. Since Hamad's son, Tamim, became Emir in 2013, the government announced legislation aiming at initially reforming 'kafala' and ultimately abolishing it. In 2016, workers with fixed contracts were allowed to change jobs without prior permission from the employer, and in 2017 exit visas were abolished.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, the government introduced a minimum wage and obliged the employers to provide health insurance coverage for all expatriates.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, grey areas in legislation that provide considerable space for serious violations continue to exist. For instance, migrant workers are legally banned from joining or forming labour unions. Moreover, the responsibility for the renewal of residence permits still lies with the employers, thus giving leverage for abusive practices when there is no mutual consensus regarding a worker's mobility.<sup>6</sup> Doha has demonstrated that it is not adamantly averse to new responsibilities and evolution. Still, the undertaken reforms are evidently inadequate and underscore the elites' unwillingness to upset the conservative foundations of the state's approach towards the workers and migrants.

Apart from the World Cup-related international scrutiny, the blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt –in other words the Quartet– precipitated, during 2017, developments in the domestic political and economic, and social fields. The Quartet's attempt to contain Doha's hyperactive and independent foreign policy ultimately backfired. The people rallied around the flag and the Emir, hence putting the latter in a position to navigate the crisis. Partially as a sign of gratitude for the people's support, Emir Tamim organised the long-delayed –since 2007– legislative elections for the Shura Council in October 2021. The elections produced two-thirds of the body while the remaining one-third was appointed by the Emir. The body is, among other things, authorized to suggest, approve and reject general state policies, control the budget and monitor administrative policies issued by the cabinet.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the recent elections do not represent a genuine course towards the democratization of Qatar. After all, the country remains a royal autocracy where coercion is used when deemed necessary, and the monarchy does not seem intent on steering political change detrimental to the existing conservative values. Issues have arisen related to the level of popular participation, the minimal women representation, and a certain degree of tribal exclusion from the process.<sup>8</sup> Noteworthy, in line with the above-mentioned branding strategies, Qatar is probably trying to win international recognition as an Emirate that is determined to modernize and progress based on the respect of its citizens' freedoms.

On the economic front as well, the blockade had the opposite results than expected. Based on its steady flow of income from long-term LNG export contracts, Qatar managed to become economically independent from its immediate neighbours. It developed alternative supply routes mainly via Turkey, Iran, Oman, and Jordan, and bolstered the domestic production of basic goods and services, in some cases –such as food security– even to the point of self-sufficiency. In the meantime, and despite the heavy toll, it coped with the COVID-19 pandemic due to its robust health system, while construction works for the 2022 World Cup continued unabated.<sup>9</sup> All these, combined with the population's siege mentality, accelerated the forge of national identity which was accom-



panied by a massive increase in military spending. Qatar is now in the process of increasing its air force nearly ninefold from only twelve fighter jets in 2017. It also boosts its ground and navy capabilities and firepower with multi-billion orders from Turkey, Italy, Germany, and China.<sup>10</sup> The possibility of antagonizing the Saudi or UAE military might amount to wishful thinking. Yet, the creation of a strong-arm component highlights the way the country's elites view the evolution of state power and projects the rapid rise of Qatari nationalism. Doha's resilience to the attempted suppression of its independence instilled pride into Qataris and showcased a significant transformation of the country's inner dynamics. What used to be considered a small Saudi protectorate would now try to increasingly define its identity away from the big shadows of the Gulf's 'others'. After all, Qatar's self-conception as the Peninsula's and the region's benevolent peacemaker is well positioned to contrast the Saudi and Emirati hegemonic aspirations and their often interventionist agendas.

During the past ten years, Doha's intensive international mobility laid the ground for developments with domestically transformative effects. The ways recent reforms in labour laws were realized and legislative elections were carried out underscored Qatar's remarkable adaptability and diligence in appeasing the international community. Also, the 'depth' of the reforms reinforced social cohesion and trust in the face of the Emir but also made sure to modernize, instead of revolutionizing, the conservative foundations of the state and the Monarchy. The country's handling of the blockade helped it to emerge fairly victorious following the 2021 Al-Ula declaration. For not only did it retain its foreign policy independence, but it also reinforced its economic might, and, most importantly, turned insecurity into a great boost of national sentiment. Last but not least and for the near future, given its current trajectory, Qatar will continue to confidently cast a greater image of its size by boldly trying to turn challenges into opportunities.



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# ECONOMY & ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION THE CASES OF KUWAIT AND OMAN

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

Much like other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Kuwait and Oman are oil-dependent economies that benefited from the recent rise in oil prices as well as the return to pre-covid-19 activities. However, there is an urgent need to diversify their economies and prepare for the challenges of a post-oil era. While both countries have developed and implemented visions to diversify their economies, political and socio-economic issues need to be addressed first, as they hinder any real economic reform.

**KUWAIT AND OMAN** are two countries in the Gulf that are not as much talked about, compared to other GCC countries. They are usually characterized as “neutral” countries, often taking the mediator role in regional conflicts. Kuwait, on the one hand, used to be a frontrunner in economy and development during the 1960s and the 1980s, but has fallen behind its more successful neighbors in the last decades. Oman, on the other hand, embarked on a program of rapid development and modernization in the 1970s, when the late Sultan Qaboos ascended to the throne. Both countries’ economies have struggled in the last years, due to the fluctuating oil prices and the pandemic. Still, overreliance on oil persists, and the deep rooted political and socio-economic issues need to be addressed.

Kuwait’s crude oil reserves make up about 6 percent of the global reserves, one of the largest per capita petroleum in the world. The country is facing a combination of economic problems in the last years, including low oil prices and the impact of the pandemic. The recent oil price increase amidst the war in Ukraine has helped the economy bounce back. It is estimated that in 2022 Kuwait will achieve the largest growth across the Gulf, reaching 5.3 per cent, followed by an estimated 3 percent growth next year, according to the World Bank.<sup>1</sup>

This has demonstrated the ability of the country’s economy to overcome world crises, but, at the same time, has highlighted its utter dependence on oil revenues. The diversification of the economy remains an imperative, and Kuwait has attempted to reform the economy as outlined in Kuwait’s Vision 2035. The latter includes the support of innovative technology, industrial and digital projects. However, due to the impact of the pandemic, many projects – including the Mubarak al-Kabeer port mega-project, considered key for the country’s economic diversification - were severely delayed.<sup>2</sup>

What is more, there is a dire need for the private sector’s contribution, in order to foster a robust economy away from the oil sector. The private sector in general took a severe hit due to the pandemic, with about 8,600 entrepreneurs switching from the private sector to government employment. It is noteworthy that one third of the government’s budget goes to public wages and benefits; it employs about 80 percent of Kuwaitis, offers higher wages, guaranteed employment and shorter working hours. Despite the government’s attempts, it has been increasingly difficult to offer incentives to Kuwaitis to switch to the private sector for employment and it is even more difficult to convince entrepreneurs to invest in the diversification of the economy. What is more, the state did not react quickly in order to ease the impact of the pandemic in the private sector. By the time the law on financing businesses affected by the Covid-19 passed in March 2021, many small and medium-sized enterprises have already gone out of business. The current financial structure does not encourage private investment, mainly due to the ongoing political crises and high government debts, which make investments riskier.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the political landscape in Kuwait is extremely unstable. The government has resigned three times within a year, while the last resignation occurred in April 2022, only three months after it was sworn in. The current political crisis stems from the opposition’s frustration with its inability to legislate, as the final say rests with the Emir, combined with the numerous efforts to silence opposition within the National Assembly. Kuwait is the only Gulf Arab state with a fully elected parliament with wide legislative



powers, and after the end of the election boycott, the number of opposition members rose significantly in the 2020 elections - which took place two months after the new Emir ascended to the throne. Despite being a loose coalition of tribal candidates, Islamists, and pro-democracy activists, the opposition is getting better at cooperating, pushing for political reforms that would cut back monarchical power. Political stagnation has created tensions on the socio-economic environment, with the public at large getting frustrated with the disillusionment of the political system. This situation effectively impedes efforts for any kind of real reform, while possibly generating tensions for widespread unrests and despair on the people's front.<sup>4</sup>

Oman, on the other hand, is a middling oil producer, pumping about one million barrels per day. However, petroleum accounts for two-thirds of exports and more than 70 percent of government revenue. Years of low oil prices had driven Oman's external debt from 64 percent of the GDP in 2016 to 94 percent in 2019; the pandemic forced the non-oil economy to shrink even further, and pushed the current-account deficit to 14 percent of GDP.<sup>5</sup> The recent boom in oil prices helped Oman's economy to bounce back, supported by the increasing the oil production - as dictated in the OPEC Plus agreement of 2021 - as well as to rebound in non-oil economic activities. Oman's economy is expected to grow by 5.6 percent in 2022, and an additional 2.7 percent in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund.<sup>6</sup> This would allow Oman not only to repay its debt and close the budget deficit, but also to strengthen other productive sectors.

The need for economic diversification in Oman is urgent, more than in most GCC countries; it is estimated that Oman will run out of its oil and gas reserves in about twenty years. When ascending to the throne in 2020, Sultan Haitham pledged to address Oman's economic challenges, and, early in his reign, endorsed Oman Vision 2040. The 10th Five-Year development Plan for 2021-25 is considered by the Ministry of Economy as the first implementation plan for Oman Vision 2040.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the government's plans to diversify revenues away from oil and reduce spending on its public sector are moving slowly, while public trust in government plans remains low. Experts have described the Vision as "overly optimistic," suggesting that the leadership needs to shift away from a traditional approach.<sup>8</sup>

However, maybe the biggest challenge for Oman is job creation, as the youth unemployment rate is about 49 percent. Protestors, mainly unemployed youth and recent graduates, took to the streets in 2018 and 2019 against high unemployment rates and austerity measures, and demanding economic reforms. The regime contained these protests by offering financial incentives to the wider population, while repressing continued opposition. The government needs to close the gap between nationals and expatriates in specific sectors, in order to create more opportunities for Omanis. Even though the number of Omanis in the private sector increased since 2020, it is still relatively low compared to the expatriate



workers.<sup>10</sup> The demonstrations that occurred in May 2021 and quickly spread across the country were a wake-up call for the continued discontent of Omanis, who demanded socio-political reforms, better job opportunities and improved living conditions, among other demands. While the demonstrations were under control relatively quickly, this was the biggest challenge for Sultan Haitham so far, underlining the structural weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the socio-economic system.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, while Kuwait and Oman's economies might be booming at the moment due to the increase in oil prices, these funds need to be allocated towards projects that will allow economic diversification. However, Oman needs to address socio-economic issues, especially youth unemployment, and focus on developing sectors with potential high revenues, such as tourism, where the educated youth can be useful. In Kuwait's case, it is extremely difficult to make any significant economic decisions, given the political instability. Kuwait needs to address the political challenges that generate insecurity, before it evolves into widespread political unrest.





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# Y E M E N T R U C E :

light at the end of the tunnel  
or prelude for a new phase  
in Yemen's war?

Katia Zagoritou

The two-month UN-brokered truce between the internationally recognized Hadi-led government and the Houthis, alongside the transfer of power from President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi to an eight-member Presidential Council, made up of military and political elites aligned with the Saudi-led Coalition, undoubtedly constitute significant developments. A grid of domestic and regional events paved the way for these developments. Yet, the newly appointed Presidential Council will have to address several challenges and internal complexities rendering doubtful the outcomes that this juncture would bring about. Whether the fragile truce will be extended would be crucial in terms of governance and meeting humanitarian needs.



**THE TWO-MONTH RENEWABLE UN-SPONSORED TRUCE** proclaimed on April 2, 2022, and President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi's replacement with the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) five days later constitute important developments in the course of Yemen's devastating war, which has entered its eighth year on March 26, 2022. It is the first time in six years that a countrywide truce is largely respected – albeit with reported violations by both sides – and crucial demands of the Ansar Allah movement, most known as Houthi, are partially met. Most importantly, these include the reopening of the Sana'a international airport and the lift of restrictions on fuel imports at Hodeidah port.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a plan to provide aid for Yemen's reconstruction has been announced by the Gulf states, namely \$3 billion by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while prisoner exchange was also agreed to take place in stages. Oman's role in the latter – as well as in the UN-led diplomatic efforts for the truce – has been crucial, as in the case of the release of 14 foreign detainees by the Houthis on April 24. Within the same framework, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition released 163 Houthi prisoners on May 6.<sup>2</sup>

Despite being dictated by Saudis and Emiratis, Hadi's departure, alongside the removal of the vice-President, Islah party-aligned Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, was long-awaited by both friends and foes. Indeed, Hadi, who mostly lived outside Yemen during his ten-year "transitional" presidency, was gradually being viewed as incompetent by his allies and at home. Aware of the fact that Hadi's detachment has particularly alienated Yemenis, PLC President al-Alimi promptly sought during a televised address on the occasion of the Eid al-Fitr on May 2 to assure Yemenis that he would lead from inside the country.<sup>3</sup>

The move for the PLC's formation appears *prima facie* to advance the 2019 Riyadh Agreement's application, which had mainly sought to bring the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which declared self-administration in the interim capital of Aden in 2020, and the Hadi government together. Yet, overcoming the challenges that the Riyadh Agreement had so far confronted, mostly stemming from the enduring distrust between the two parties, remains a hard task; for instance, whether the proclaimed unity will be materialized in terms of militias' integration into a unified Yemeni military will be a crucial test of the unity message.<sup>4</sup>

### **A close-up of the PLC**

The eight-person Presidential Council was announced at the conclusion of the Gulf Cooperation Council-sponsored intra-Yemeni talks on April 7, 2022, five days after the UN-brokered ceasefire. Houthis declined to attend due to the Saudi interference in the war unless the talks took place in a neutral venue while afterwards they rejected the PLC as an illegitimate negotiation body. The PLC is headed by Rashad al-Alimi, a former Interior Minister who built a strong relationship with Saudis during his mandate, alongside Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed –both from Taiz governorate– and consists of two broad anti-Houthi factions. The first is a Saudi-backed network and the second is a collection of UAE-backed forces. Southerners were given four seats: STC President Aiderous al-Zubaidi, who enjoys UAE support, Abdelrahman al-Muharrami, head of the UAE-backed Giants Brigades, Abdullah al-Alimi, an Islah member and Hadramawt governor Faraj al-Bahsani; of whom the last two are considered as rivals to the STC revealing therefore the internal divisions within the southerners' camp. The other three members of the PLC are Marib Governor Sultan al-Aradah, with



good relations with Islah, Tareq Saleh, leader of the UAE-backed National Resistance forces and nephew of late former Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Parliament Member Othman al-Mujali, a Saudi ally.<sup>5</sup>

The new Presidential Council presents itself as an anti-Houthi political unification putting forward its unity as a potential advantage in the talks with the Houthis, while it could serve as a military coalition against Houthis in case the ceasefire collapses. Yet, it is highly doubtful how these parties, with conflicting agendas who fought each other in the past can efficiently cooperate in order to resolve Yemen's problems.

### **Paving the way for a truce**

The PLC's formation followed the Saudi-led coalition's approach shift, whose current pursuit for a disengagement from Yemen required a new Yemeni leadership. Hadi's endorsement of the truce under Saudi pressure should be read through this lens. The approach change has been shaped by the same developments which paved the way for reaching the current UN-mediated truce: a series of domestic, regional and international events intertwined with a combination of factors. At home, the Houthis have failed to take over the oil-rich Marib, under the Saudi-backed Hadi government's control, largely owing to the intervention of the UAE-backed forces Giants Brigades in Shabwa, Marib and Al-Bayda governorates. That event has reflected the increasing understanding between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, without which bringing all the actors they back into a partnership would not have come into being.

At the regional level, the gradual increase of Houthi's successful cross-border attacks against strategic targets, such as oil infrastructures and airports, in Saudi Arabia and, for the first time in January 2022 in UAE, not only revealed the enhanced military capacity of Houthi, but also raised serious security and economy-related concerns for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The attacks on the latter appear to have been a reaction to the UAE's re-engagement in the conflict and a response to the territorial losses and the impediments by its backed forces in capturing Marib and Shabwah.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the willingness of both countries to finish the war, especially of Saudi Arabia, has been increased as the war turned into being particularly detrimental to Saudi economy and reputation; the international criticism of Riyadh's role in the Yemeni humanitarian tragedy has been crucial.

The progress of the contacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also been important. Indeed, the fifth round of Iran-Saudi talks in Baghdad in late April, with a Yemen component, resulted in a roadmap aiming at their relation's normalization and a 10-point memorandum. Furthermore, reconsideration of regional relationships by both Tehran and Riyadh seems to be in the making, given a combination of factors: the US's steady disengagement from the region, the negotiations over the revival of the nuclear deal, known as JCPOA, which, if they come to fruition, will lead to the lifting of sanctions and the



subsequent surge of the Iranian economy, and the Iranian willingness to diversify its trade routes.<sup>7</sup> As for Iran's stance vis-à-vis the ceasefire, it welcomed the truce viewing it as a positive step underlining though the necessity of a process coming from Yemenis and including Houthis to any process.

Lastly, Saudi and Emirati reconsideration of their relations with the US have undoubtedly played a decisive role in fostering the truce. Tim Lenderking's, US special envoy for Yemen, recent statement that "the Saudis recognize that this war has gone on too long; they are eager to end it," echoes the Saudi intent. On the one hand, the reassessment of their relations with the US pertains to Yemen war-related issues, such as the fact that the US have turned a deaf ear to Saudi and Emirati requests to redesignate the Houthi as a terrorist organization. On the other hand, the US stance towards its allies and its disengagement from the Middle East have affected the way Riyadh and Abu Dhabi envisage ensuring their interests within a different regional context under a new security architecture. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, as well as its military reluctance to directly intervene in the Ukraine war, are telling.<sup>8</sup>

### Challenges

Undoubtedly, the PLC is confronted with several challenges related to its composition and legitimacy, its backers and realities on the ground. Three key challenges concern, first, the council-members' different political agendas, second, how the relations between the Saudi-led coalition and the PLC will unfold and third and foremost, dealing with the Houthis alongside the compromises in which the Council should engage.<sup>9</sup> Still, the most serious PLC's shortcoming is that it was created by non-Yemenis to represent Yemenis without its members owing their position to the Yemeni people's will. Hence, Osamah al-Rawhami views rather a continuity in Saudi Arabia's and UAE's stance in denying Yemenis sovereignty over their own affairs. Additionally, alongside the lack of prior negotiations among the council's components, the enduring distrust among them remains alarming.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, except for the indirect representation of the Islah party, mainly due to the UAE's objection against Muslim Brotherhood affiliated parties,<sup>11</sup> the PLC's domination by military and militia leaders fully excluding traditional political parties such as the Nasserist and Socialist parties seems politically risky. Crucially, in the view of women's absence in the PLC, the importance of the inclusion of various sectors of the Yemeni society – women, youth, and civil society – in peace-process and in mitigating the overrepresentation of Yemeni armed fractions has been constantly highlighted.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, apart from the intra-council challenges and even before moving to resolve the conflict with the Houthis, the PLC will have to confront the current rise in suspected activity by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, whose levels in Aden, Abyan and Southern Yemen remind those between 2012 and 2015. Nevertheless, the most crucial challenge with which both warring parties, the PLC and the Houthis, are confronted is the daily hardship of Yemenis, the vast majority of whom are in need of humanitarian assistance.

In conclusion, while talks over the truce extension are ongoing, the considerable decrease of violence can be viewed as a huge development with tangible effects on Yemeni's life given the bringing of humanitarian aid within the reach of more Yemenis in areas



which had not been reached since the onset of the conflict, as well as the flow of essential goods and fuel. Yet, considering that numerous multifaceted challenges persist, it remains to be seen what this new phase in the war-torn Yemen will bring about.

*The article was written before the announcement of the two-month extension of the truce on June 2, 2022.*

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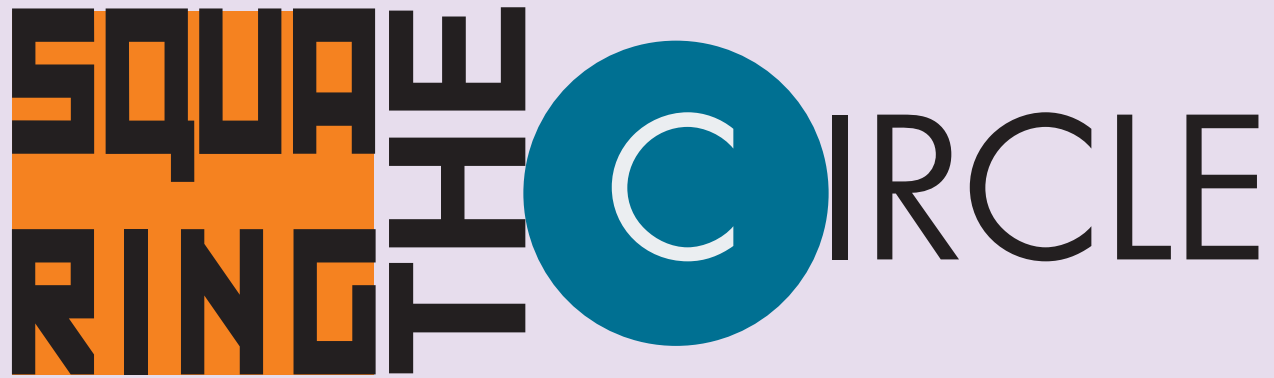
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# Russia, China vs the US in the Gulf

Ilias Tasopoulos

The Gulf has been undergoing a process of transformation in the previous period, both in the behavior of the countries in the region and in the approach of major powers, such as the United States and China. The understanding reached between the Gulf countries and the US has been put under stress. According to this unwritten deal, the former would provide the world's energy, and the latter would act as an offshore guarantor of their security. This gradual change continued following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



**THE ELECTION OF JOE BIDEN** marked a turn in the relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States. The state of affairs between the two during Trump administration was much more straightforward as its focus was purely business-oriented.<sup>1</sup> Any discussion about the poor human rights record of Saudi Arabia was side-stepped. However, Joe Biden had pledged during his election campaign that he would ensure American support towards Saudi Arabia would not be without any strings attached anymore. Ever since the brutal assassination of American-Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, where the Saudi regime was implicated, Biden raised this issue frequently in his public speech.

When Biden assumed the presidency and introduced his new terms on the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia, Riyadh responded by starting to engage one of its major foes, Iran. The Saudi regime initiated official direct talks with Tehran, showing its dissatisfaction with the new American stance while, at the same time, expressing a desire to negotiate a new regional equilibrium.<sup>2</sup>

As time passed, it became clear that the American president could not follow his initial promises.<sup>3</sup> For example, after Houthi forces launched rocket and drone attacks across Saudi Arabia, the Biden administration decided that the United States could not leave its ally alone. Washington opted to send additional Patriot anti-missile systems to help the protection of energy facilities.<sup>4</sup> This turnaround proved that the importance of the Gulf countries as energy suppliers remains a constant in international affairs.

At the same time, demand for oil from all over the world, and China, in particular, has illustrated that there are other paths that the Gulf countries can follow. Traditionally, commercial relations have political consequences. The joint declaration of Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart during Putin's visit to the Winter Olympics indirectly addressed the Gulf leaders, among others, when they suggested that other patterns of democracy and human rights' protection for every country should be developed globally, according to the needs of its population. In contrast to the dominant model in international relations that the United States promote, Gulf countries place extreme value on non-interference in their domestic affairs and could share this perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The prospects for fissure in their alliance with the West became apparent when Russia invaded Ukraine. It proved much harder for the White House to convince its Gulf allies than its Western partners, for example, to bear the costs of the sanctions on Russia. Perhaps the United States thought Saudi Arabia would be willing to raise its oil output to help offset the shortages in the global market after the Western sanctions. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohamed bin Salman, symbolically chose to speak with Vladimir Putin first.

Despite long-held ties with the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries chose to remain committed to the OPEC Plus agreement and retain their ties with Russia, even if attempts to isolate Russia multiplied. While energy prices soared and brought Western governments under pressure from their citizens due to the unexpected inflation, Riyadh kept its nerve.

China and Russia are now much more present in the Gulf region. The percentage of Chinese oil imports is rapidly increasing, as more than half of its oil imports come from the Gulf. China has become Saudi Arabia's top import and export partner, as the total bilateral trade between Saudi Arabia and China grew to \$76 billion in 2019.<sup>6</sup>

Russia has also strengthened its ties with the Gulf. The relationship with the UAE serves as a prime example. Vladimir Putin an-



nounced during a speech at the Eurasian Supreme Economic Council that Moscow is going to sign an economic integration agreement with the United Arab Emirates and a free trade agreement with other countries in the world, including Iran. The total trade between Russia and the UAE increased to 86.03 per cent compared to the same period in 2020, amounting to \$3,769 billion, while for Saudi Arabia, there was also an increase of approximately 58 per cent according to pre-pandemic figures in 2019, up to \$1,667 billion.<sup>7</sup>

China has also set in motion a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran. Beijing institutionalized in March 2021 what was taking place in the last years, as it secured large quantities of oil at discount, while channeling low-price goods and items. Parallel to this enhanced relationship in Tehran, Beijing opted to express its deep understanding of the security concerns of the Gulf kingdoms, coming forward to condemning Houthi strikes on Abu Dhabi and backing Gulf Cooperation Council actions in Yemen.<sup>8</sup>

This is not, however, indicative of a U-turn in Gulf affairs. Neither Russia nor China is able to replace the United States, despite the fact that their penetration in the Gulf grows day by day. None of them has projected sufficient military capabilities in the Gulf to present an alternative to the West.

Even if the roots of Gulf kingdoms' relationship with the West remain deep, the relative weight of the US in the Gulf has declined. In relation to the past, Gulf leaders are more prone to lead an autonomous course, which may run contrary to what the United States would expect.

In such an ever-changing environment, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Gulf countries seem to be valuable allies for the White House.<sup>9</sup> Qatar helped Washington address the Afghanistan debacle, as the hasty withdrawal of American forces did not go as planned, and a massive airlift to the safe haven of the tiny kingdom took place to remove diplomatic personnel and citizens.<sup>10</sup> At a crucial time, Qatar provided refuge after the evacuation of thousands of Americans and their allies, while afterwards, it served as an interlocutor with the new Taliban regime.

Threats to their survival originate more from the domestic field rather than from abroad, where the superior military power of the United States could stop any attack. Therefore, Gulf leaders would prefer partners willing to defend their regimes from any rebellion that might erupt, as in the Arab Spring, for example. The vacillating US policies towards Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, which led

to his removal from power in disgrace, have proved to the Gulf kingdoms that Washington is not the reliable ally they hoped.

At the same time, the White House has understood after the Russia-Ukraine war that it cannot be in conflict with all of the world's energy producers. Nevertheless, this is something that Gulf leaders are also aware. Saudi Arabia, for example, agreed to a modest production rise in oil after reportedly Biden agreed to personally visit the kingdom, in a move that sealed that the American president would abandon his plans of isolating the kingdom.<sup>11</sup>



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# PEOPLES AND CULTURES IN THE GULF

## THE “KAFALA” SYSTEM



Eleni-Panagiota Stoupa

The ‘Kafala’ system represents one of the most important features of the Gulf Cooperation Countries. While in Arab culture it provides a framework of social solidarity, in its current form it represents one of the worst forms of labor exploitation. Although, in the last decade, small steps have been taken in favor of foreign labor migrants, the remaining gaps are significant. The establishment of human rights protection mechanisms, along with a unified labour contract, is a significant step towards the reform of ‘kafala’ through its own original values.

### Between 'culture' and 'reality'

**ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT** and extensively analyzed features of the Gulf region in the academic, political, and social discourse is the so-called 'kafala' system. The word originates from the root kāf – fā' – lām, covering diverse meanings such as to feed, be responsible for or warrant.<sup>1</sup> In Sharia law and Islamic jurisprudence, 'kafala' denotes an agreement between 'kafil' and 'makful', in which the first party undertakes the responsibilities of the second party's interactions, based on either a financial (Kafala bi al-mal) or a physical (Kafala bi al-nafs) guarantee.<sup>2</sup> In Islamic culture, 'kafala' represents a notable idea that embodies moral, social and commercial aspects, providing a framework of social solidarity based on trust and cooperation among people. But currently, the reality seems different in the Arabian Peninsula.

In the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), as well as Jordan and Lebanon, 'kafala' or 'sponsorship system' composes a business-oriented model that delineates the dependence between local employers and foreign workers. This system offers local employers a sponsorship authorization to draw in foreign labor workers - especially from Asia and Africa - by undertaking all their personal expenses such as housing, transportation, and travel. At the same time, it provides employers with the ability to enforce severe restrictions upon foreign workers, by retaining their legal documents and visas, withholding their payments, demanding longer work hours, or restricting their access to healthcare services. As such, a disparity in the power dynamic between kafil and makful is established, violating key traditional Islamic values of trust and protection, and transforming it into a system of oppression and exploitation of migrant labor.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1970s, domestic workers represent a significant percentage of the temporary, contract migrant labor workforce in the GCC. Most of them are women coming from Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Nepal.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, almost 3.77 million domestic workers were hosted in the region, while, in 2017, nearly thirty million migrants were under the 'kafala' system, representing half of the Gulf countries' total population.<sup>5</sup> In the current globalized economy, Gulf migration has become tantamount with the worst forms of labor exploitation, including human and sexual trafficking. The hierarchical structure of Gulf residency has been described by many academics as an 'ethnocracy' – a unique practice of the region – highlighting how Gulf States stonewall foreigners from almost all features of national identity, as well as the social good profits of oil wealth.<sup>6</sup>

While the contemporary practices of the sponsorship system in the working environment of the Gulf are emphatically different from the Islamic jurisprudence's version of 'kafala', interestingly, no ancestral links between them have been detected. An unexpected interrelationship developed from 1920 to 1970, according to historian Al-Shehabi, during the rule of British colonials' administrators.<sup>7</sup> Through their attempt to control labor migration and foreigners in the pearl industry and later in the oil sector, British colonial rulers introduced a system of sponsorship and indemnity. By perceiving labor migrants as a necessary evil that needs to be regulated, they established a system of sponsorship, which seemed perfectly compatible with the principles of 'kafala' in Islamic law and the Arab tradition.



### ‘Reforming’ Reality: The Devil Lies in the Details

In the last decade, multiple measures have been taken against the authorization of sponsors with regards to labor migrants, providing additional degrees of freedom. In order to facilitate domestic workers’ mobility, Qatar declared the replacement of the ‘kafala’ system with a contract-based one in 2016. During the same period, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait implemented relevant labor reforms, allowing workers to easily take a chance on employers, while Oman announced plans to abolish the No Objection Certificate (NOC). The following year, Bahrain assembled a flexible pilot visa system for migrant domestic workers with which they could work for multiple employers by sponsoring themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Insecurities are born out of crises, but some crises mirror these insecurities. The Covid-19 pandemic affected the livelihoods of labor domestic workers, exposing them to greater risks than before. By the same token, Covid-19 worked as a beacon regarding the conditions of domestic workers in the GCC -such as the unsanitary, overcrowded living places, or their precarious legal status- making it impossible for the states to ignore their basic human rights. However, the temporary humanitarian relief was not enough to minimize the exposure of domestic workers, as well as to preserve their human rights and dignity.

The recent labor reforms in the Arabian Peninsula are shaky but encouraging signs for the sponsorship’s system overhaul. In 2020, via an amendment to a law governing domestic workers, Kuwait switched the word ‘servant’ with ‘domestic worker’ in order to abide by international human rights law.<sup>9</sup> Since the beginning of 2022, a nine-month probation period will begin for domestic workers in Qatar, in which the sponsors are bound by the directives related with the recruitment of foreign workers. According to these, they should provide the domestic worker –before recruitment– with a copy of work conditions and a signed contract from the employer.<sup>10</sup> During the same period, Bahrain officially launched the third and final phase of its Wage Protection System (WPS), while, in the UAE, it will be extended to domestic workers voluntary.<sup>11</sup> Toward this direction, Oman included the official removal of the no-objection certificate in June 2020. In Saudi Arabia, a new bylaw will be applied which aims at regulating the work mechanisms, rights and duties of domestic workers in the Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas the states of the Arabian Peninsula have disassembled some core pillars of the ‘kafala’ system, significant issues remain, and the risks are high. Even though these reforms are a step in the right direction, the devil lies in details. They mostly provide small

changes to the old system and rename practices, while it is not clear how they will work. The establishment of human rights protection and safety mechanisms for domestic workers, along with the implementation of a unified labor contract, remain of vital importance. Their enforcement will extend law protection of migrant workers, bring the GCC labor laws in line with the standards of the International Labor Organization, and progressively redefine the ‘kafala’ system with the values of Islamic tradition and culture.



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