



# **NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION**

## **GULF STRATEGIC TRENDS**

June-July 2013

## **Executive Summary**

Adjusting to the new political environment created by the rapid growth of the blogosphere and the rising popularity of social networks and mass media (especially among the youth) is still an ongoing exercise for the Gulf states.

Discontent at the political status quo is expressed mainly by two groups: the new youth groups and the older “Islahiyyin” (“reformist” in Arabic), traditionally grown in the Shi’a minority, which resides mainly in the East region on the Gulf shores.

Thus the main single factor of destabilization is external and consists in the rise of sectarian violence from the Syrian crisis spill over interfering with domestic politics. The Gulf governments keep therefore a watchful eye on every possible connection. For instance, since ar-Riyadh is upset by the role of Hizballah in Syria, the Saudi ambassador in Lebanon has threatened to deport supporters of the group, in coordination with similar moves by the other GCC countries.

Other political changes are almost all non-traumatic and give the sense of a more or less functioning regional balance and of the slow progress of state consolidation in spite of all the present internal problems. Among these one can mention: the coming to the throne of the new Emir of Qatar, the end of the sanctions against Iraq (Chapter 7 of the UN Charter), the normalisation of the relations between Iraq and Kuwait, the holding of the postponed provincial elections in the Iraqi governorates of Anbar and Nineveh and the terrorist event in Bahrain.

## **Situation Report**

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Saudi Arabia is still working in adapting to the new political environment created by the rapid growth of the blogosphere and the rising popularity of social networks and mass media. The 29<sup>th</sup> of June a court has sentenced seven cyber activists to terms of prison between five and ten years, charging them with stirring to protests, mainly using Facebook. The men have all admitted posting in Facebook pages to support the leading Shi’a cleric Tawfiq al-Amer, who was arrested in February 2011 after calling for a constitutional monarchy.

Two main groups express their discontent at the political status quo: the new youth groups and the older “Islahiyyin” (“reformist” in Arabic), traditionally grown in the Shi’a minority, which resides mainly in the East region on the Gulf shores. In many respects, the goal of the new youth groups (the release of political prisoners and a constitutional monarchy) are not dissimilar to those of the older Islahiyyin. Differences regard mainly time frames and tactics.

The simmering discontent which destabilizes the Eastern region has certainly roots in the sectarian discrimination suffered by the Shi'a minority, but it would be wrong to interpret it as a purely localised or narrowly Shi'a issue. Many of the protesters' demands do not relate specifically to Shi'a rights and ask for a wider change of the status quo, a request shared by the new youth groups.

So far the government's inclusive strategy of answering these requests with a tried and tested mix of economic measures and benefits has worked, allowing a controlled modernisation of the state and the society.

An example is given by the official decision to switch the start of the weekend from Thursday to Friday: a similar proposal was rejected in 2007, notwithstanding the lobbying of the Saudi business community, and left Saudi Arabia as the only country among the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council to persist with the old format and only three working days in the week. Another sign of a shifting attitude towards change is the surprising new campaign against domestic violence launched by the Khaled Foundation, a novelty also because it is a Saudi version of the international "White ribbon campaign".

The main single factor of destabilization is external and is given by the political domestic impact of the Syrian sectarian violence. The Saudi government keeps therefore a watchful eye on every possible linkage. For instance, since ar-Riyadh is upset by the role of Hizballah in Syria, the Saudi ambassador in Lebanon has threatened to deport supporters of the group, in coordination with similar moves by the other GCC countries.

## ***Iraq***

Terrorist assaults continued unabated in Iraq also in June and July: spring and summer 2013 were the bloodiest seasons since the peak of casualties in 2006-2007. The 7<sup>th</sup> of June, 80 km northeast of Baghdad in the province of Diyala, an Iraqi suicide bomber hit Shi'a Iranian pilgrims on a bus, leaving nine dead. Two days before at least 14 people were shot dead by gunmen masquerading as militaries manning a checkpoint on a central Iraqi highway southeast of Ramadi. Then a wave of car bombs rocked central and northern Iraq in the province of Diyala, killing 57 people (10/6/2013). The 18<sup>th</sup> of June two coordinated suicide bomb attacks at a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad killed at least 29 people. Six days later ten car bombs exploded across Baghdad, killing nearly 40 people.

Not only Al-Qa'ida's local wing seemed to have a role but also other Sunni armed groups, including the Naqshbandi Army, an expanding network of outlawed Ba'ath members and ex-army officers.

Sectarian strife did not relent among other ethnic groups as well: the 25<sup>th</sup> of June two suicide bombers targeted a protest camp set up by ethnic Turkmen north of Baghdad demanding better security for the area. Two days after at least 16 people were killed in a series of bombings that struck crowded cafes in and around Baghdad. The 1<sup>st</sup> of July a suicide bomber blew himself up at a mourning ceremony inside a Shi'a mosque in the town of Muqdadia. Seven days later a series of attacks in Mosul and southeast of Baghdad left 15 dead on the ground. Moreover, the Sunni governor of the Sunni dominated province of

Nineveh escaped an assassination attempt that left two people killed and three other wounded (13/6/2013).

There is a debate among analysts and politicians whether what is raging in Iraq is actually a civil war or not. On one hand those who answer positively do so focusing on internal factors, such as the Sunni-Shi'a divide and the ability of Iraqi politics to deal or not with the challenging transition towards a functioning nation-state. On the other those who deny the existence of a civil war focus on a regional and global analysis and tend to emphasize the role of Al-Qa'ida and of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI).

Far from being exclusive these two approaches are instead complementary in a situation that resembles the civil war during 2006-2007. There is an increasingly violent regional confrontation between Sunni and Shi'a groups that involves in Iraq strong local and regional actors like AQI. Anyhow, qa'edists are in any case functional to the wider ethnic dimension encompassing the ideological one and take advantage from this first one.

A sign of these dynamic tensions was given by the difficulties besetting the merger in Syria between the Syrian jihadi group, Jabhat an-Nusra, and the Iraqi one, Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). First the merger was announced and then ruled out by a declaration of Al-Qa'ida's leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri, in a letter in which ISI's leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was rebuffed and his command limited to Iraq.

As a matter of fact if Sunni Arab grievances remain unanswered, Iraq may face further violence. However, the exacerbation of Sunni anger against the central Shi'a-led government has not so far translated into any unified or coherent political leadership. This leaves still room of manoeuvre to the Shi'a majority in trying to include the Sunni minority in the effort of building a state. A sign of this still viable opportunity was given by the postponed provincial elections in Anbar and Nineveh (20/6/2013). In the elections mainly local forces got good results, while prime minister Nuri al-Maliki was satisfied with the election of governor Fahdawi in Anbar. For the rest of the contenders, despite running in the most populous governorate after Baghdad, they were unable to be among the top 15 most voted politicians at national level: a fragmentation that allows reconciliation if well exploited.

## ***Kuwait***

The 16<sup>th</sup> of June the Kuwait Constitutional Court declared the country's parliament illegitimate and ordered the end of the legislation, closing a phase of uncertainty opened last year by the Emir's decree to amend the electoral law. In question now are the July 25 elections, which will be probably a non-starter as it was the case with the previous ones in February 2012.

In parallel with this slow but ongoing reforming process, aimed at consolidating the state, Kuwait is engaged in a strategy of normalisation of all bilateral relations, especially those with neighbouring countries. An historic breakthrough in this respect has been the visit of the Emir to Baghdad (12/6/2013), which occurred two months after Iraq's acceptance of the final demarcation of the borders. The symbolic gesture of having the ambassadors of the two countries at the UN requesting to take Iraq out from the sanctions of Chapter 7 and to put it under Chapter 6 regime will have important economic and political benefits. One

dispute still opened is the Mubarak Port, a controversial project under construction near the Kuwaiti Bubiyan island, which raises Iraq's concern about the port's potential impact on Iraq's already limited maritime traffic in the Gulf.

The decision however to settle the rest of the war damage compensations under chapter 6 of the UN Charter will help the Kuwait government to deal with other thornier issues, such as the flux of private Kuwaiti donors which are helping the Syrian rebels.

This happens to be the work of the political opposition and, in contrast with Saudi Arabia and Qatari help, it is done outside any coordination with the USA, UK, France, Turkey or Jordan and especially outside any official channel set up with the Friends of Syria Group. It is unclear who the final recipients of these funds are, but there are signs that the assistance is going mainly to the Islamist component of the Syrian rebels.

## ***Oman***

Facing a decline in international tourism – a phenomenon which is common to all Gulf states except for the recent recovery showed by Dubai – Oman has put a lot of effort to revive domestic tourism. Part of this plan has been the renovation of Muttrah Market by the Muscat Municipality, which turned the place into a masterpiece. The Muttrah market is similar to other popular markets in the Gulf, such as the Bab al-Bahrain market in Manama and the Al-Hussein market in Cairo, among others, and enjoys a particularly beautiful setting between the nearby mountains and the sea. Another notable economic project is the development of the port of Duqm, with the launch of a nearby Special Economic Zone.

## ***UAE***

Even though the UAE are politically stable and more insulated than other countries from negative regional political trends, the government keeps a watchful eye on possible trouble makers, mainly Islamists. Sixty-one of them have been convicted of coup-plotting the 1<sup>st</sup> of July and received jail terms of up to ten years. The sentence attracted criticism by human rights groups. Many of the 94 defendants belong to al-Islah (“reform”, in Arabic), a group known for its ideological proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood, and a brand for similar groups in the Gulf area.

In a different episode, the Dubai Police has arrested a man whose YouTube video showed an aggression in the street by an Emirati citizen against an expatriate driver (13/7/2013); the arrest put again the issue of foreigners' working conditions in the limelight and sparked a debate over the strict national laws on filming public scenes and people. The Dubai Police has made public the arrest on Twitter.

## ***Qatar***

The regional trend of a slow political change peaked in Qatar when Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani announced the 25<sup>th</sup> of June that he was transferring power to his son, Sheik Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The Al-Thani family has been in power in Qatar for almost 150 years, and Sheik Tamim at 33 will be the youngest leader in the Arab world.

The new emir indicated that he would continue his father's foreign policy and the appointment as foreign minister of the long-time deputy foreign minister, Khalid al-Attiya, a figure close to the previous emir and deeply involved in Qatar's international mediation efforts, should confirm this first impression. On the other hand the appointment of the new prime minister was read by analysts as a signal that the new emir will be refocusing on domestic affairs. In fact the new prime minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser al-Thani, has been Interior minister since 2005 and keeps has Interior as his second portfolio.

With the increasing complexity of the developments of the Arab Revolution, all the limits of Qatar's tiny dimensions vis-à-vis a growing international projection have come to the fore. Without a clear regional framework for any diplomatic effort, the motivations that built the elite consensus for overcoming the geographic constraints with a new geopolitical dynamism have faded, also because this approach has reaped in the last few months more problems than successes. This has been the case of the disastrous choice to buttress the Morsi government only weeks before its destitution, or of the growing criticism against Al Jazeera, or the waste of time and money in the Libyan expedition alongside ungrateful European powers.

It is therefore likely that at least in the first period of his rule the new emir will focus on internal matters as the first way to stabilize the country and reduce the costs brought by a long-term and punch-above-the-weight policy.

## ***Bahrain***

In the first week of June at least five Bahrainis have been killed fighting in Syria. These deaths had an unusual impact in Bahrain, prompting a debate about whether the previously quietist image of the Bahraini Salafi movement still holds or whether there has been a change in identity, attitude or both.

These events may make more acute the political dilemmas on how to deal with the always volatile political internal situation by an already fragmented Sunni ruling elite, roughly divided between hawks and doves as far as the democratic empowerment of the Shi'a majority is concerned. Hardliners are mainly around the prime minister and are focused on maintaining the status quo at all costs. The 6<sup>th</sup> of July two attacks against Shi'a majority villages have left one police officer dead and at least three others injured.

In this context the efforts to destabilize the country from outside can be more effective. On 17 July a car exploded in the city of Riffa without causing any casualties. Riffa is close to

the residences of the Bahraini crown prince and the Interior minister. An Iran-linked group claimed responsibility for the car blast, even though there is no evidence to date of a direct Iranian involvement in Bahrain.

## **Regional Trends**

Given the fact that internal imbalances both political and economic in the Gulf states seems to be below an alarm threshold, thanks to the regional strategy of allowing generous sums of money to be spent to soothe social grievances especially after the beginning of the so called Arab Spring in 2011, the biggest challenges come from the relation of the region with the outside world.

In this respect are two the most relevant issues: one is the Syrian civil war; the other regards the quality of the relations with the post-Brotherhood Egypt.

As for the first issue, similarly to the situation during the first Gulf War of 1990 (in which the pro Saddam PLO position put the Palestinian community in a difficult position) difficulties are increasing for the hundreds of thousands Lebanese who work and live in the Gulf. The GCC countries are taking a harder and harder stance against this community, especially those of Shi'a origins, both for security concerns and as a tool to put pressure on the Lebanese government to take action against Hizballah. Not only diplomatic steps but financial actions are considered in the foreseeable future against this organization.

Regarding the second one, Egypt is a pivotal state for the Gulf. The Morsi government alienated the Gulf states especially after the visit to Iran that Morsi made last February. The only exception was Qatar, that tried to extend its influence by supporting financially the Morsi government, and that now has been quick in changing its approach after its fall. Therefore, less than a week after Morsi's ouster, Saudi Arabia and the UAE offered Egypt an assistance package totalling \$8 bn on the same day.