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New emerging balances in the post-Arab Spring: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Gulf monarchies

The first political result emerging in the countries going through a political transition after the Arab Spring is the rise of the so-called “moderate political Islam”, which in most cases is represented by political parties directly or indirectly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Sometimes, for a superficial observer, it is easy to confuse the Muslim Brotherhood ruling in North Africa and the conservative Wahhabism dominating in the Gulf monarchies. They both share strict religious approaches to public and private life, a well-organized and fixed internal hierarchy, and even the same feared long beards.

Nevertheless, looking at the two Islamic doctrines more closely major differences come out, especially with respect to their approaches towards politics, society, and the rule of the state.

With the Muslim Brotherhood’s sudden rise to power in several Arab states – including Egypt, the biggest Arab country and historically a political guide for its neighbours – such big differences have the potential to lead to a confrontation, also due to the very influential role assumed by the Gulf monarchies in the political and economic life of the rest of the Arab World¹. The first evidences of this process are becoming clear in the last months, and they seem to open a rift not only between the Wahhabi-dominated Gulf monarchies and the International Muslim Brotherhood, but also within the Gulf monarchies themselves, in respect of their different approaches towards the “Brothers”².

The Muslim Brotherhood in the GCC

The main example of the arising Muslim Brotherhood “phenomenon” is the Egypt’s “Freedom and Justice Party”, founded after the January 25th revolution by the local MB, which, after having being the main opposition organization during Mubarak’s rule, has surged as

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring changed deeply the political structure of several countries of the Arab world such as Tunisia and Egypt. However, its effects go far beyond the domestic politics of these countries, and are affecting the power balances of the region. The Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties have emerged as a new important player, proposing a new bottom-up approach to power based on an Islamist ideology. Their rise is watched with growing concern by the rich Gulf monarchies that fear the challenge that the Brotherhood may pose in the close future on their monopoly over the political-Islam discourse. Since the 2011 uprisings different tactics to deal with the new “Brotherhood threat” have been adopted by the GCC countries. Some key facts occurred in the end of 2012 have highlighted the differences between the increasingly hostile posture towards the Brotherhood demonstrated by the UAE, Saudi and Kuwaiti authorities, and the Qatari stance. Qatar is emerging as a key supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, and especially of its most important branch in Egypt. This growing rift among the GCC may result in a new struggle for power within the organization. Saudi Arabia, its traditional leader, may have soon to face the rising power of Qatar and its Brotherhood-linked allies.

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The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

¹ E. DACREMA, *Modello islamico cercasi*, Ispi, Commentary, 20 September 2012.

² S. SULUM, الهجوم الخليجية على قطر (*The attacks of the Gulf against Qatar*), «al-Akhbar Arabic», 17 January 2013.

the main protagonist of the new political order. The same can be said of the Tunisian Ennahda or the currently biggest Moroccan party, “Justice and Development”.

The Muslim Brotherhood ideology, even if deeply conservative, must be considered very different from the strict Wahhabi doctrine diffused in most Gulf monarchies. While under a political point of view the latter is characterized by an alliance between the religious leadership and the ruling elite which leads to a top-down exercise of power, the former is based on a more bottom-up approach. The Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organizations are characterized by social and political activities among the lowest strata of the society. This leads its doctrine to be more appealing to the disinherited masses and keener to accept the democratic process – even if strongly influenced by Islamic values – as a legitimate method to exercise – or at least access – power.

After being founded in 1928 by the Egyptian cleric Mohammed al-Banna, Brotherhood branches blossomed in several Arab countries such as Jordan (where today it represents the main opposition organization), Palestine (the Palestinian branch was originally part of the Jordanian branch and today is represented by Hamas), Tunisia, Libya, Syria and the Gulf countries.

In the course of the last decades the history of the Muslim Brotherhood organizations in the Gulf have witnessed several turning points³. With Gamal Nasser’s rise to power in Egypt and his anti-Brotherhood campaign in the 50s and 60s, members of the movement found in the Gulf – and especially in the most important adversary of Nasser’s Egypt, Saudi Arabia – a safe haven to escape persecutions at home. The ideology spread among the Gulf people, whose youth was often introduced to the Brotherhood while studying in Egyptian universities. The exponents of the organization settled especially in the Saudi education system, which for many years hosted some of the most important Brotherhood ideologists, such as Abdullah Yufus Azzam, who later drifted to a more Salafi ideology and became Osama Bin Laden’s first mentor⁴.

However, with time the presence of the Brotherhood – and especially the growing influence of its scholars in the Gulf states’ institutions – began to be seen by the ruling Wahhabi elites more as a threat than as a useful ideological tool. At the beginning of the 90s, an anti-Brotherhood campaign swept the Gulf countries, resulting in hundreds of arrests and the criminalization of most of the MB-linked organizations. Many of these organizations remained active, even if often in clandestine or semi-clandestine structures. They have always been united in a single trans-national organization, the International Muslim Brotherhood, which is traditionally led by the supreme guide of the Egyptian branch.

Having to face the hard repression of many Gulf states and the status of semi-secrecy in which even its most important branch was forced by Mubarak’s regime, the international organization gradually lost its influence and its capability to keep the activities of its single branches coordinated. In 2010 in an article for *Foreign Policy*, Nathan J. Brown defines the International Muslim Brotherhood as “politically irrelevant” in the Arab World, describing how the election of Mohammed Badia as Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s supreme guide had been almost ignored by the MB leaders of the other Arab states⁵.

However, the Arab Spring and the electoral affirmation of the MB-linked parties suddenly reversed this status of sharp decline. Encouraged by the political successes in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, since 2011 many other Brotherhood branches have started to intensify their activities, often sparking the concerns of the Gulf rulers⁶.

³ H. HASSAN, *In the Gulf, allegiance is the issue for the Muslim Brotherhood*, *TheNational*, 30 January 2013.

⁴ G. KEPPEL, *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2006, 4th edition.

⁵ N.J. BROWN, *The irrelevance of the international Muslim Brotherhood*, «*Foreign Affairs*», 20 September 2010.

⁶ The international organization has been the focus of internal polemics in Egypt, related to the refusal of the local Muslim Brotherhood to constitute itself as a legal social-religious organization inside the country. This would have obliged the

In the Gulf, the first alarming calls about a possible “Brotherhood take-over” spread already in mid-2011, especially in Kuwait, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, only since Autumn 2012 the tones became really serious, reaching the point of threatening the diplomatic relations with Egypt.

In the UAE the government increased the crackdown on al-Islah, the social-oriented NGO which has been always accused of being a secret member of the MB network⁷. The repression culminated with the arrests in late December of several Egyptian citizens and the current tense situation.

The GCC reaction to the Arab Spring

The Gulf monarchies, after having avoided major political changes within their restricted club in the last two years, have now come to fear the Arab Spring's longer-term effects.

In fact, the 2011 Arab Awakening has – with the exception of Bahrain – only skimmed the coasts of the Arabian peninsula. The Governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – the organization that gathers the hydrocarbon-rich monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar – adopted different approaches to face the potential wave of instability that could compromise also their regimes (after having erased from the political map decades-long rulers such as Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gheddafi). The Gulf countries passed from a very concerned “wait-and-observe” position during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, to a more proactive role both internally – taking measures to contain possible “revolutionary contagions” by restricting the renewal of residence permits for Tunisian and Egyptian workers – and externally, leading some of them even to military interventions. Depending on the relations of the Gulf monarchs with the threatened rulers, such interventions took various shapes. They have been either in support of the rebellions – like in the case of the Qatari and Emirati warplanes sent to Libya – or against them, as exemplified by the thousands of GCC soldiers that entered Bahrain to support the ruling royal family⁸.

Despite few differences – especially regarding the Egyptian revolts against Hosni Mubarak (a friend of Saudi Arabia but often in opposition to Qatar) – along the last two years the Gulf monarchies moved politically together, following the two traditional policy lines which characterized the GCC international stance in the last decades.

On the one hand, they pursued the goal of maintaining the political status quo, especially in the countries politically and geographically closer to the Gulf. This stance led to the intervention in support of the ruling family in Bahrain, and the financial support – even an invitation to join the GCC – for the only two Arab monarchies not included in the organization: Jordan and Morocco.

On the other hand, the GCC countries actively tried to exploit the opportunity offered by the Arab Spring to pursue their second main traditional geopolitical objective: the weakening of Iran's geopolitical influence in the region. This has determined the strong support of the GCC to the Syrian uprising, which aims to topple the Assad regime, the most important ally to Iran in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, although the Iranian threat shows signs of decreasing – the fate of Bashar al-Assad appears certain, although delayed, and Iran finds itself in an increasingly strenuous struggle to support its economy against the international sanctions – the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood may pose a new challenge for the Arab monarchs, especially in the religious and ideological fields.

leadership to publish and make publicly monitorable the financial resources and activities of the organization, highlighting in this way the connections with the international branches.

⁷ P. HAKALA, *Opposition in the United Arab Emirates*, European Parliament's Directorate-general for external policies, 15 November 2012

⁸ E. RAGAB *et al.*, *A formative stage: relations between GCC and North African countries after the Arab Spring*, Mediterranean Paper, IAI, December 2012.

The Gulf monarchies towards the Muslim Brotherhood

Linked facts in UAE, Kuwait and Egypt

Since the end of 2012 some facts – apparently not directly linked to each other – are highlighting the growing concerns of the Gulf monarchies towards the Arab Spring's transitional regimes led by the MB-linked parties.

A diplomatic crisis between Egypt and the UAE was sparked by the arrests of several Egyptian citizens accused of being part of a "Muslim Brotherhood cell" in the Emirates⁹. They face the charge of plotting against the ruling UAE leadership, the alleged plot fitting into the framework of a supposed Muslim Brotherhood conspiracy to take over the Gulf monarchies. Saudi Arabia has demonstrated its support for the UAE government's action with a comment of its Foreign Minister Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, who defined the Muslim Brotherhood as the «source of all the problems of the Islamic world»¹⁰.

Following the UAE events, the Kuwaiti government summoned a closed-door parliamentary session to debate the last developments regarding the Brotherhood's activities in the Gulf, and especially in Kuwait, where traditionally it has had a strong influence¹¹. According to the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar, during the "secret" session another topic was also debated: the growing Qatari support for the Brotherhood.

These events occurred only a few days before the arrival of the Iranian foreign minister Salehi to Egypt for a historic visit which was supposed to mark a turning point in the relations between the two countries, characterized by latent tensions since the 1979 Iranian revolution¹². The visit had been preceded by rumours about several meetings having occurred between the leaderships of the intelligence services of the two countries. This further heightened concerns in the Gulf about a possible renewed cooperation between Egypt and Iran also in this field.

This move was evidently allowed by the renewed self-confidence of President Mursi's government. Apparently the Egyptian ruling party considers itself capable to pursue its own foreign policy without having to take into account Saudi preferences and positions. This is something that appeared improbable at the beginning of Mursi's presidency, when few weeks after his election the first post-revolutionary Egyptian President travelled to the Kingdom to seek help for his country's troubled economy.

This renewed self-confidence is probably the result of the vigorous support of another wealthy emir of the Gulf: Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, whose stance towards Iran has always been much less vigorously hostile than his Gulf neighbours'. In fact, among the Arab monarchies Qatar is taking its own specific – and almost opposite – approach towards the Muslim Brotherhood. While the Emirates were launching their campaign of arrests, according to the Egyptian newspaper Egypt Independent, in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood-led government was having secret negotiations with a Qatari delegation to reach an agreement including a sort of "Qatari tutelage" on the Egyptian state's budget. Egypt, which in the last two years has been going through one of the most serious economic crises in recent history, obtained from Qatar a total of \$5 billion, deposited in its central bank, which contributed to halt, at least temporarily, the currency depreciation¹³. The contents of this agreement are not publicly available yet, but they are rumoured to include a big Qatari share in the contracts for the expansion of the Suez Canal, the Egyptian support for the Qatari candidacies to international

⁹ B. KASAB, مبارك وإيران في الخلفية: أزمة مصر والإمارات (*Mubarak and Iran in the background: The Egypt-Emirates crisis*), «al-Akhbar Arabic», 17 January 2013.

¹⁰ J. SPYER, *Behind the lines: a Gulf apart*, «Jerusalem Post», 22 January 2013.

¹¹ A. ATUAN, الحرب على الإخوان تشق الخليج (*The war against the Brothers divides the Gulf*), «al-Quds al-'Araby», 11 January 2013.

¹² H. HASSAN, *Iran-Brotherhood ties: rooted in history with eye on future*, TheNational, 18 January 2013.

¹³ R. KHALAF, *Doha aid fails to stem Egyptian currency woes*, «Financial Times», 10 January 2013.

posts, and even the abrogation of the Arab League's clause which determines that the League's general secretary must be from the country that hosts the organization (currently Egypt)¹⁴.

The Qatar Exception

As exemplified by the deal with Egypt, Qatar is taking a completely different stance towards the MB. It is financially supporting the Egyptian government, it has given political legitimization to the Hamas rule on Gaza through an historical visit of the Qatari emir in the Strip, and, according to several sources, it is strongly financing the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, while the support of the rest of the GCC to the Syrian opposition appears to be mainly directed towards the Salafi groups.

In fact, the strong Qatari relationship with the MB is nothing new. For decades, the small emirate has played host to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian theologian who is considered one of the most prominent intellectuals of the International Muslim Brotherhood. His program on the Qatar-owned channel al-Jazeera is among the most followed TV-shows in the Arab world. Beyond this old link, it is now clear that Qatar is working hard to establish new deep ties with the arising Islamic movement.

Why does Qatar not share the same concerns of its Gulf neighbours? What are the factors that are shaping the unique Qatar policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood?

These factors are basically two, and they can be summed up as the Qatari sense of immunity, on one hand, and its huge geopolitical ambition, on the other.

Qatar's sense of immunity comes from certain characteristics which make the small emirate a unique case among the Gulf countries. For instance, its small demographic size – together with remarkable hydrocarbon-income – is considered its greatest shield against every kind of political discontent and grievance. Its 250,000¹⁵ citizens – who shows the highest per-capita income of the world and the highest percentage of billionaires among a single population – are considered hard to mobilize against their ruler by political or ideological means.

On the contrary, more populous monarchies such as Saudi Arabia (27 million inhabitants), UAE (5 million) or Kuwait (2.5 million) present much more social complexities among their populations which expose them to a greater risk of domestic discontent. The economic gap among the social classes are often much wider, and especially Saudi Arabia and Oman show exceptionally high rates of youth unemployment, which have been one of the main factors that caused the revolts in the rest of the Arab World.

Although the Gulf monarchies – with exception of Bahrain – did not face the kind of mass uprisings observed in North Africa, some of them – especially Kuwait and Oman – witnessed big demonstrations. In Saudi Arabia some demonstrations occurred in the province of Qatif, populated by its politically isolated and neglected Shiite minority. Furthermore, for decades the Saudi kingdom has been facing several different motions for political reforms coming from very different parts of its society, often even contrasting with each other (liberals, conservatives, religious minorities). In these countries, the Muslim Brotherhood's revolutionary appeal is seen as potentially attractive for the different social classes that show growing discontent and seek political changes.

¹⁴ M. SHAMS EL-DIN, *Qatar's cash deposits raise questions of political leverage over Egypt*, «Egypt Independent», 13 January 2013.

¹⁵ The total inhabitants of the Qatari peninsula are 1,750,000. Apart from the 250,000 Qatari nationals, the rest is composed of foreigner workers, mostly from Asia, Arab countries and Europe.

Compared to its GCC neighbours, Qatar seems much more confident about its own political stability and about its capability to pursue its well-known great geopolitical ambitions while coming to terms with the rising Muslim Brothers. Their preeminent political role in Egyptian politics is going through several problems, especially some of economic nature, which Qatar seems intent on exploiting, in order to “buy” the Brotherhood’s friendship and influence its foreign policy.

The access to the investments in the Suez Canal reveals the Qatari intention of having a stake in the Egyptian most strategic geopolitical asset. It may result in a tremendously effective tie between the two countries in the long term, while the Egyptian support could turn out to be the decisive factor in changing the balance within several international organizations – for instance, the Arab League.

Conclusion: Qatar’s bet and the GCC future

In the beginning of 2012 Dubai Police Chief Dhahi Khalfan affirmed that «the Muslim Brotherhood threat to Gulf security is equivalent in importance to the Iranian threat».

Even if based on the current reality of several Arab countries in transition, such a strong statement may have come too early. The main factor on which the future developments depend is the real long-term resilience of the Muslim Brotherhood as ruling force.

The last developments in Egypt have demonstrated how fast it has been possible to dissipate much of the consensus the Brothers have been building up in decades of clandestine opposition. The Constitutional referendum of December 2012 witnessed a turnout of only 33% and a rather underwhelming victory of the “Yes”-front, while less than two years before, the referendum on the March 2011 Constitutional Declaration resulted in a turnout of 75% and a major victory for the Brotherhood’s stance.

The MB party’s consensus is evidently sinking under the waves of the dramatic economic crisis and the strategic mistakes its leadership has committed. Most observers seriously wonder about the chances of the “Freedom and Justice Party” to obtain a ruling majority in the next Parliamentary elections, scheduled in April or May 2013. Nevertheless, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Qatar’s emir, is heavily betting on the Brothers’ resilience, injecting a large amount of resources to win the gamble.

The possible long term survival of the Muslim Brotherhood as the main political protagonist in several Arab countries – and primarily Egypt – may heavily influence the balance of power within the GCC in the future. With a strategic ally like Egypt, Qatar would increase its leverage remarkably in the region. Thus the small emirate would be given the chance to pose a real challenge to the Saudi leadership within the GCC.

In conclusion, new competitions within the Arab world could emerge in the post-Arab Spring. Time will tell how the Muslim Brotherhood – that seems on a raising path to become a new regional protagonist – is going to be when (and if) it emerges as the victor of the long and troubled transitional period: the question to be answered will be whether it can act as an independent player in the region, or whether it will play the role of just another Qatari geopolitical tool.

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