

Saudi Arabia and the Challenge of GCC Expansion

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Executive Summary

Saudi Arabia's drive to extend Gulf Cooperation Council membership to Jordan and Morocco is the latest attempt to prevent pro-democracy demonstrations expanding to the Gulf. It also represents a direct challenge to so far timid attempts in European capitals to move away from backing regional autocracies – a high-risk and high-cost strategy which has directly contributed to the region's democratic uprisings and instability in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – towards a more sustainable long-term strategy supporting inclusive development and political reform. Although there are undeniable short-term gains for European states in supporting these anti-democratic policies, these are far outweighed by the medium- to long-term benefits of moving towards a more politically and economically sustainable strategy reconciling European values and interests.

Issues

After consistently refusing to expand its membership since its establishment in 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council has now accepted Jordan into its ranks, and actually invited Morocco to apply for membership. This unprecedented volteface is being justified by GCC states – lead by Saudi Arabia – in the name of prospects for cooperation in a range of areas: trade, education, tourism, and even fisheries. The primary impulse for this sudden change of policy, however, is fairly transparent. Having been established in response to the threat by Iran –in reaction to Iraq's invasion in 1980 – to 'export the revolution', the GCC is now expanding its membership to counter another existential threat: the region-wide demand for democracy. At the heart of the GCC overture is a bargain Saudi Arabia is offering its monarchical counterparts: oil and debt relief in exchange for crackdowns on pro-democracy movements, and the political backing to go with them. Exploiting the divisions in the international community between advocates of a 'responsibility to protect' and the right of the international community to intervene to stop massacres of civilians on the one hand, and those who prioritise non-interference in 'internal affairs', Saudi Arabia calculates that a crackdown on reformists in strategically important Jordan and even in a less geopolitically significant Morocco will pass without objection or significant action. Given the feeble support given by Western governments to pro-democracy demonstrators in Bahrain, Yemen and even Syria, this calculation is likely to be correct. It should also be noted that after protesting vigorously the possible implications of democratic change in Egypt in particular, Israel's reaction to this expansion in Saudi Arabia's diplomatic reach has been notably muted.

After the crackdown in Bahrain and over \$100bn committed to buying off support in Saudi Arabia, the GCC's expansion to include Jordan and Morocco is a step change in the Saudi government's attempt to crush pro-democracy movements across the region,

Keywords

Gulf Cooperation Council, Middle East, Jordan, Morocco, United States, Europe, Democracy

Quotables

- The 'Yes' vote is often presented as an endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi extremists, or the NDP. But 'yes' voters span the political spectrum: they vote yes either to ensure stability, or to secure revolutionary gains against the authoritarian temptations of the military or the Brotherhood.

- Attempts to make support for democratic elections conditional on their outcome have always produced long-term blowback.

- European governments' interest in stability, security and growth in Egypt are best pursued by encouraging democracy and social justice simultaneously.

Abstract

Egypt's referendum on Constitutional amendments is the first significant test of the Egyptian Revolution's democratic aspirations. Amidst fears of a resurgent NDP or a newly dominant Muslim Brotherhood, it is often presented as a test of their strength.

But a 'yes' vote also represents a way of consolidating the uprising's gains and reducing instability and insecurity in post-revolutionary Egypt.

not least by raising the cost of already shaky Western support for these movements. The Saudi government is making clear to Europe and the US that backing democracy has a price tag: Saudi Arabia's allegiance. In this sense, the GCC's expansion constitutes a direct challenge not only to democratic reform movements throughout the Arab world, but also to any attempt by Western governments – the EU in particular – to rethink core conceptions at the heart of its Southern Neighbourhood strategy – security and stability – in the light of the patent failure of the orthodox approaches which its pre-Uprisings policies represent. Western confidence in the stability of its Middle Eastern allies, in the political 'affordability' of support for the region's authoritarian regimes, stemmed from the assessment that the combination of economic and political marginalization which has been the trend for the majority of the general population throughout the region could be kept in check by regional governments. The uprisings of in Tunisia, Egypt and since then across the region have spectacularly shown the limits of this approach, and have led some to acknowledge the need for reform to be based on real political, social and economic inclusion. In essence, this reflects core EU values, and presents an opportunity to recognize the compatibility of European values and interests. Such an approach, however, would undermine the so-far unquestioned political control and economic exploitation regional regimes have been able to exercise with Western support. This is the political context within which Saudi moves to expand GCC membership should be understood.

If Western states allow this development to go unchallenged, they will benefit in the short term from 'stability' which would shore up financial markets already jittery about conflict in Libya. A crackdown on immigration towards Europe from Morocco could also prove tempting, particularly to France and Italy. However, these short-term benefits will come with several serious longer-term effects. First, such a policy choice will, in the eyes of the region's pro-democracy movements, undermine any remaining credibility European states have in claiming a normative commitment to democratic values. Secondly, it will render even more precarious the already brittle stability of regional autocracies. Third, it risks driving popular support away from democracy and towards more radical forms of confrontation against both local regimes and their international supporters: the longer such conditions persist, if and when such regimes are overthrown as they were in Tunisia and Egypt, the more successor governments are likely to oppose European interests.

Although running the risk of short-term divergences on a range of issues – from policies towards the Palestinian question to trade negotiations – European support for democratic values in deeds as well as in rhetoric is likely to produce a far more stable scenario for both economic growth and political reform in the region.

In the event, the 'Yes' option received nearly two thirds of the vote. While the Brotherhood and Salafi groups were quick to claim this as an endorsement of their movements and their politics, this conclusion is self-serving: some undoubtedly voted according to 'party' lines, but for many others this was seen as a chance to either reign in the instability of post-revolutionary period or to insure key gains against any temptations parts of the military might feel to use.

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