

DYNAMICS

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40 Years of GCC

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Dynamics is a monthly publication on the unfolding relations between Europe, the Arab Gulf and the wider Middle East. Published in both hard- and digital formats, each issue features information papers, commentaries, analyses and interviews of field specialists. Every issue represents a collection of ideas, insights and comments, both exclusive and collected from external sources, with the aim of providing an innovative look towards the Gulf region. Dynamics is completely **free** and collaboration is open to everyone.

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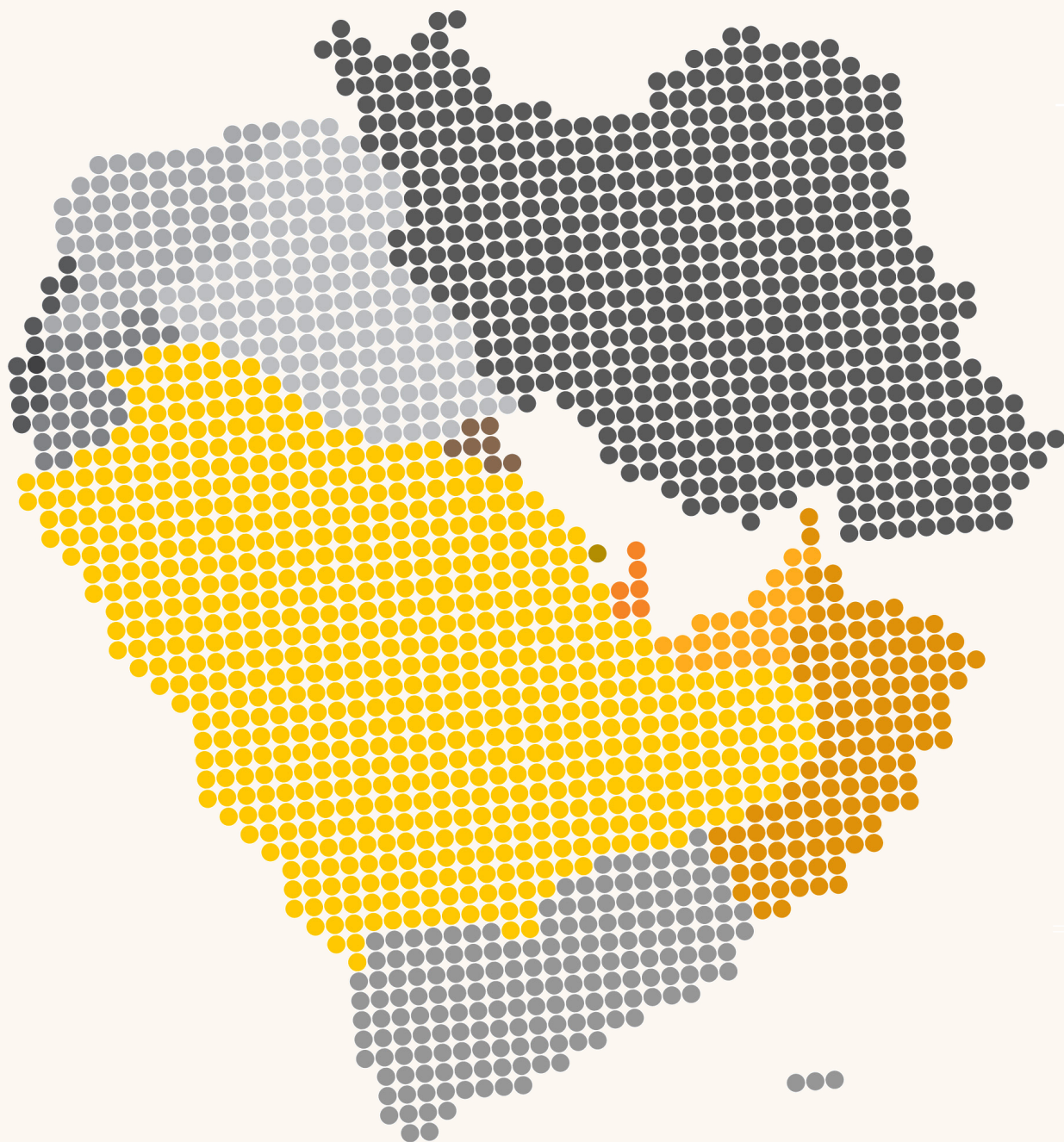
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WALKING A TIGHTROPE

40 Years of the Gulf Cooperation Council

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Over its four decade history, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has gained important experience in dealing with regional challenges and has worked hard at reinforcing stability and peace. This was particularly true of the multi-faceted turbulence that faced the Gulf in the post-1979 era. The institutional framework of the GCC provided a reliable, and resilient tool for tackling aspects of instability while assisting the GCC states coordinate their individual strategies, as well as towards a formalised idea of regional unity that would extend far beyond security. Although the Gulf region has not been able to fully settle its geopolitical tug-o-war — it is located in the eye of a complex political, religious and economic storm — and the GCC must walk an unpredictable tightrope, it has done so, largely, with maturing confidence. Two recent events foreshadow GCC thinking about ways to stabilise the region: 1. the

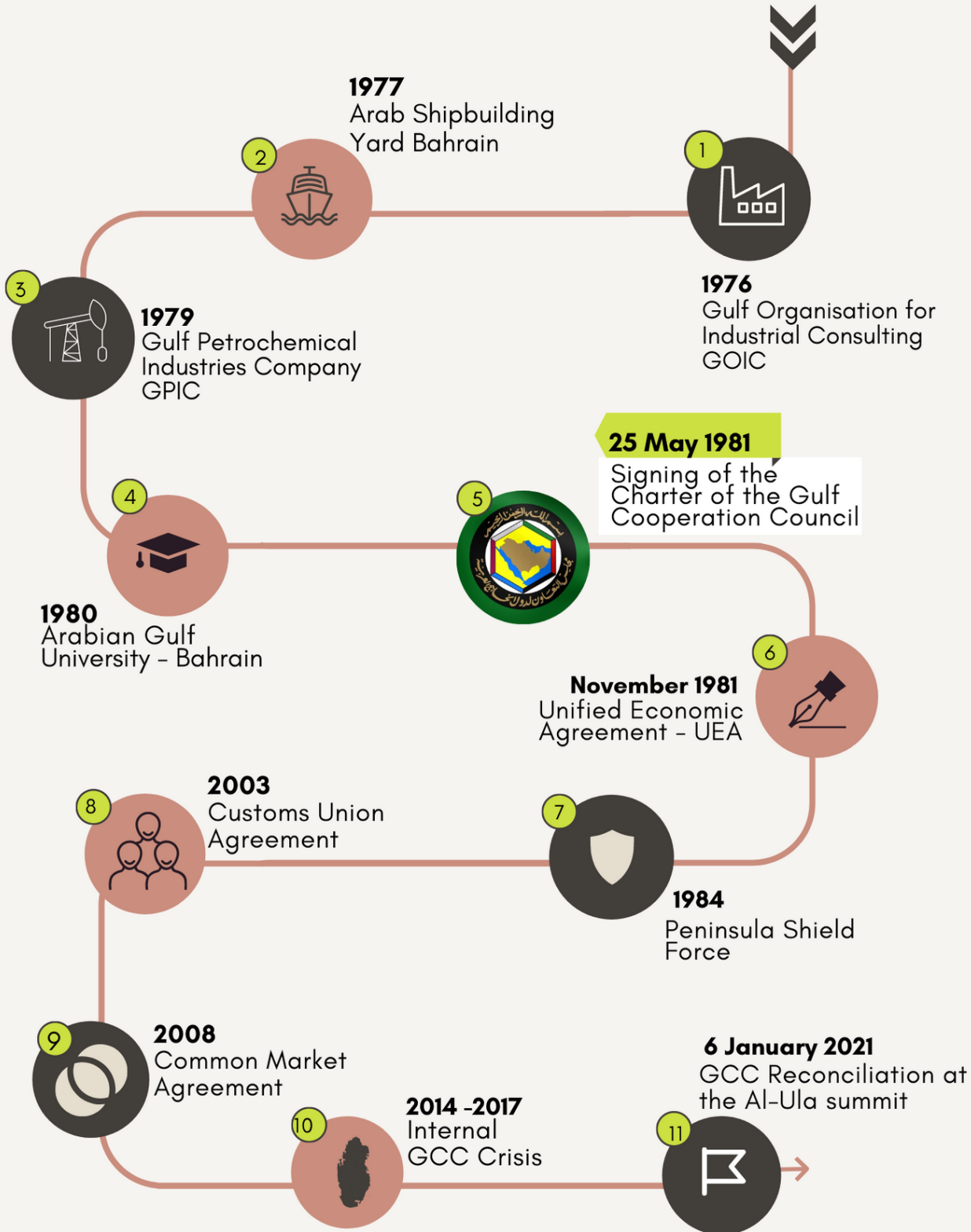
Abraham Accords (re: between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel), which marked a historic step in Arab-Israeli rapprochement and transforming the regional geopolitical paradigm and 2. the Al ‘Ula GCC Summit, which restored unity in the GCC after almost four years of division.

As May 2021 marks the GCC’s 40th anniversary since its establishment, Dynamics explores some key aspects of its past, present and future. This issue pays specific attention to the GCC’s history and perspectives for renewed Gulf unity after the Al ‘Ula Summit Agreement. This issue also assesses the GCC countries’ parliamentary systems, and provides an insight into the evolution of transportation in the region. This issue of Dynamics includes exclusive infographics on the GCC’s crucial aspects and on its very *raison d’être*.

We look forward to your feedback!

GCC INTEGRATION

The Major Steps



40 YEARS LATER

Looking Back to Look Forward at the Gulf Cooperation Council

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will mark its fortieth anniversary on 25 May 2021. Reflecting on the organisation's achievements and challenges will help contextualise current regional dynamics. What began as a security alliance, comprised of the six Gulf monarchies, to collectively defend themselves from the tide of Islamic revolution (in Iran) and Arab socialist-republican adventurism (re: Ba'athism in Saddam Hussein's Iraq) has steadily evolved into a six-ringed forum for discussing and coordinating an expanding portfolio of policies related to: 1. economics and trade, 2. security and defence, 3. science and education, 4. environment and 5. society and culture. While the GCC has not yet reached the integration level as the European Union (EU) — which it is often compared to mainly due to the similar economic and security rationale — the GCC has brought the six Arab Gulf countries closer together and motivated them towards cooperation in the face of numerous internal and exogenous challenges. Despite the gradually intensified cooperation, intertwining of policies and legislature harmonisation, the GCC countries have remained independent and maintained their separate policies and bilateral relations with foreign countries as prescribed by their national interests.

The GCC is yet to turn a supranational corner—and may not seek to ever do so. In the shadow of Iran's Islamic revolution, by 1981, the regional security situation had considerably deteriorated. Tehran learned early how to use asymmetric power in pursuit of its interests and quickly lay the groundwork to export its Islamic revolution. It deployed militias across the region, including to Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Saddam Hussein gambled on what was perceived as an easy territorial conflict with its chaos-stricken neighbour—but dragged out into an eight year, high-intensity war. Not to be left out of the fray, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan—ostensibly to stop Islamism from reaching its Muslim-majority republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Saudi Arabia was still reeling from the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Egypt was isolated due to the Camp David Accords with Israel, tensions continued between the US-aligned North Yemen and the communist South Yemen, civil strife on the opposite side of the Red Sea continued to brew in Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan and a cross-regional religious fundamentalist awakening took root to be later channelled into the creation of numerous terrorist organisations fuelling advanced

sectarianism. With the exception of a few, rare, flashes of stability, the Arabian Peninsula and its proximity, have not calmed in the subsequent decades. Even today the situation is no less tense. However, external crises seem to have tightened existing ties and highlight the importance of unity and innovative ideas to weather the storms lapping at the GCC's shores. To be sure, the idea of clustering the Gulf countries preceded the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, which later acted as an impetus to speed up the GCC's formation. In the mid-1970s, following the decision of Bahrain and Qatar to remain out of the newly formed union of six (later seven) emirates — the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — in 1971, Kuwait's Emir, Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, and the UAE's President, Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, did not abandon the idea of a closer intra-Gulf relationship and called for establishing the GCC. In October 1979, the first general text of the GCC was drafted in Saudi Arabia, but disagreements, particularly over the economic versus security integration aspects, stalled its formal creation. Finally, on 25 May 1981, the leaders of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, convened in Abu Dhabi to adopt the GCC Charter. It unified countries in the nascent stage of independence from the United Kingdom, vulnerable economically and to external destabilisation, with countries that enjoyed longer period of statehood and stability, and with significant size disparities. Despite the apparent differences, those countries united under a shared vision for stability and development of the region. Of course, both Iran and Iraq

had different ideological visions for the region and took issue with the new organisation. With challenges becoming more acute day-on-day, the GCC announced a joint defence force, the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), in 1985, to act as a collective security umbrella; enhancing deterrence, interoperability and intelligence sharing. PSF has deployed several times, to various levels of success: four times to Kuwait — first as a deterrent of Iran-Iraq conflict contagion (1985-1988), then in 1991 to help liberate Kuwait from Iraq's occupation, again in 1994 as Iraqi troops' amassed on Kuwait's borders in 1994 and finally in 2003 during the US-led invasion of Iraq — and once to Bahrain in 2011 as a deterrent for exogenous interference. In mid-2011, the GCC's 30th anniversary was marked against the backdrop of a wave of uprisings across the Middle East. The GCC sought to reinforce the organisation and invited Jordan and Morocco to join while Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah floated the idea of moving towards a "Gulf Union," which was met by mixed reactions. While these proposals have, so far, failed to materialise, the GCC — and its members — has adopted a more proactive and robust role regionally and internationally over the past decade. Their increased confidence and power partially also stems from their abundance of strategic resources as, together, they possess roughly a third of the world's proven oil reserves and almost one quarter of all natural gas deposits. Energy wealth has formed the backbone of the GCC economies, whose combined GDP increased almost six times, from \$278 million (USD) to \$1.6 trillion over the past four decades,

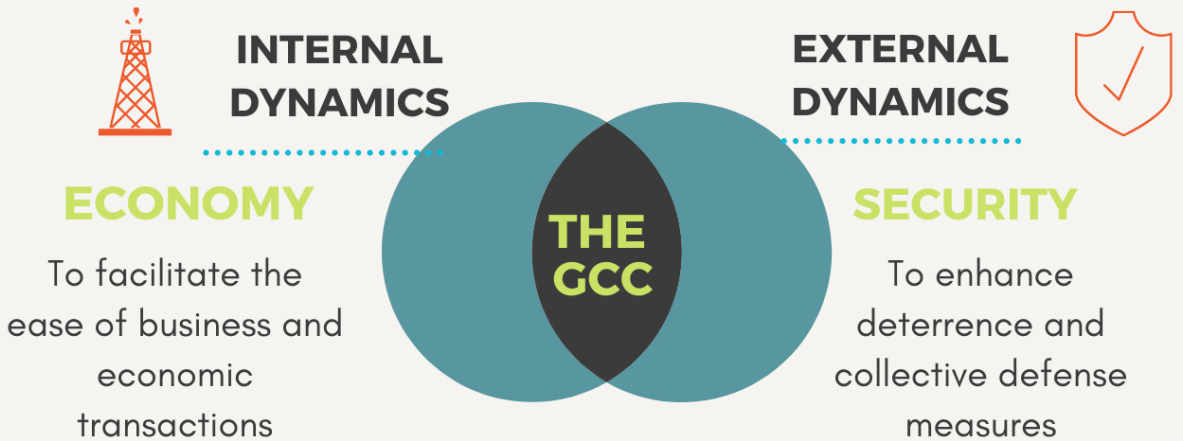
as the GCC population quadrupled. The economic portfolio played a crucial role in the GCC's integration, transforming it from a free trade area in 1981, to a customs union in 2003 and eventually a common market by 2008. There were even talks about common currency and negotiations about free trade agreements with various countries and other regional groups have been ongoing. Despite four decades of turbulence, the GCC has shown a remarkable level of resilience. Although 2020 saw the passing of two GCC rulers, Sultan Qaboos of Oman and Emir Sabah of Kuwait, a new glimpse of hope was sparked at the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021, when the new generation of GCC leaders convened to end the 3.5 year intra-GCC conflict. In the face of the COVID-19 crisis and rising regional tensions, the GCC countries have again managed to find their way to each other.

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The Reasons Behind the Gulf Cooperation Council

مجلس التعاون لدول الخليج الفارسي



Nature of the GCC



GULF UNITY

Reconstituting the Gulf Cooperation Council: Al-'Ula and Beyond

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With a multitude of crises lapping at the shores of the Arabian Peninsula, it is important to reflect on some of the more pronounced changes that may strengthen the region's institutional framework and, through it, provide enhanced stability. Although initially met with scepticism, the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Al-'Ula Summit (05 January 2021) has been recorded as a key step to both ending tensions within the bloc and providing greater regional stability. While differences between Qatar (on one hand) and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE [and Egypt] (on the other) will continue, and disagreements will surface, reestablishing diplomatic routes will certainly ease pressure and allow crisis management to replace acrimony. The Al-'Ula Summit brought the leaders of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) together to the Maraya Concert Hall, the world's largest mirror-clad building, and offered space and a place for reflection on the GCC's 41 years of existence and how to chart through the latest obstacles towards unity. The Final Communique, the so-called 'Al-'Ula Declaration,' restored a spirit of 'solidarity and stability' after nearly a decade of simmering tensions and four years of boycott. To the casual observer,

it is difficult to see what tradeoffs were made to end the crisis and bring the six GCC States together to the table especially since the key demands by the Quartet went unheeded. However, the undercurrents were always more important than those aired in public and the idea of GCC unity in the face of mounting regional tensions — from bubbling hostilities in Iraq, the continued Iran-US tug-o-war and a conflict in Yemen set to spillover and further engulf its neighbours. And here the fruits of the Al-'Ula Declaration can be most visibly seen: at the 147th session of GCC Ministerial Council on 17 March 2021, the GCC Secretary-General, Nayef Al-Hajraf stressed the indivisibility of security amongst GCC member states, and affirmed the GCC's collective stance to support Saudi Arabia against the provocative acts of the Ansar Allah (re: the Houthi militia) which has increased the tempo and ferocity of attacks against civilians, airports, seaports and vital energy resources. Crucially, the GCC also denounced Iran's continued support for terrorist groups and insurgent militias while reiterating its support for UAE sovereignty over the three islands, Abu Musa, Upper and Lower Tunb, which have been occupied by Iran since 1971. It is also important to consider the timing of,

particularly, Riyadh's enthusiasm for the Al-'Ula Summit—Saudi Arabia continues to make huge strides in reform and modernisation and does not need yet another unresolved issue on its frontiers especially with Qatar with which it shares more than a strategic position in the Gulf, they are also communities of fate. Some have argued that ending the Gulf crisis was also meant to signal political maturity to Washington in the context President Biden's 'recalibration' of relations with Saudi Arabia. However, that may be too shortsighted. The US will continue to rely on Saudi Arabia [and vice versa] but only as long as Washington remains entrenched in the region. If its pivot to Asia is embarked on, Saudi Arabia may have to start thinking about security in a post-US Middle East. That would entail constructing — with partners including the US, UK and many in Europe — a new security architecture for the region. Getting the GCC back on track, a goal sought by all six members, was certainly a fundamental first step. Over the past months, intra-Gulf relations have changed trajectory

and the international community is paying attention. Reconciliation efforts raised more than eyebrows, they also raised the prospects for the GCC to again lead-by-example since it is a stabilising institution. Instead of walking a tightrope, balancing between the various fractions of the GCC, international actors can again approach the grouping together. Russia and China, the US, UK and EU have all redoubled their engagements with the GCC and, individually, with its members and, it seems, that the region is finding itself as a central node in international affairs. To be successful under the spotlight, the GCC requires actorness and actorness requires unity. In that way, the Al-'Ula Summit may be understood as having achieved two fundamental goals: first in paving the way to an enhanced communications and cooperation mechanism to solve intra-Gulf issues before they are cemented and, second, to signal to the exogenous world that despite periodic tension, the return to GCC unity is only ever really a Summit away.

AN OVERVIEW

The GCC Countries' Parliaments

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Kingdom of Bahrain

Bahrain has a bicameral parliament, the National Assembly, which consists of two 40-member chambers: the Council of Representatives (COR, *Majlis al-Nawab*) and the Consultative (Shura) Council (*Majlis al-Shura*). While the former is directly elected, the latter is appointed by the King. The National Assembly was first formed in 1973, but two years later it was disbanded until its reactivation in 2002 under King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa as part of the new Constitution, which enabled both men and women to vote and run in the parliamentary election. Since then, elections take place every four years. Women first entered the parliament in 2006 as one woman was elected to the COR and nine were appointed to the Shura Council. Like in the rest of the GCC countries, political parties are prohibited, however, in contrast to its Gulf counterparts (except Kuwait), candidates can align with political associations and run under their banner in elections, or run as independents. Once seated, their roles include proposing laws, and, unlike the other GCC parliaments, they may amend the Constitution. Moreover, the COR can call a vote of no-confidence of Ministers and dismiss them, while the Shura Council oversees the state budget and can accept, amend or reject draft laws. In the most recent 2018

election, independents won 35 seats, al-Asalah, a Sunni Salafi society, won three, Progressive Democratic Tribune (al-Minbar), a left-wing society, won two and the National Unity Assembly, a Sunni party, won its first seat. About half of the elected independents then formed parliamentary groups: Bahrain, Taqadom, a left-leaning group, and Al Methaq (National Action Charter), a politically liberal alliance, leaving the number of unaffiliated at seventeen. Within this composition, women secured six seats in the COR and nine seats in the Shura Council, including Fawzia Zainal, who became Bahrain's first female Speaker and second among the GCC countries, after the UAE.

State of Kuwait

Kuwait's unicameral parliament, the National Assembly (*Majlis al-Umma*), consists of 50 members directly elected every four years, along with 15 appointed Ministers, so-called ex-officio members, of which one has to be also an MP. Thus, in contrast to its GCC counterparts, Kuwait's parliament seats more elected than appointed members. Those elected are considered independents since political parties are outlawed, but, as in Bahrain, members can form informal societies. Following Bahrain again, these members can interpellate, dismiss and call a vote of

no-confidence in Ministers, as well as initiate and pass laws and approve the budget. The first National Assembly was elected in 1962, making it the longest-serving majority-elected parliament in the GCC. While elections take place every four years, Kuwait's parliament stands out in the region as it is often dissolved by the Emir, most recently in 2016 due to disagreements over oil prices. New elections, however, must always be called within two months following the dissolution. In the last election of 2016, the opposition, which included the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Salafis, Shia Muslims, tribal factions and liberals, won 24 seats, and the remaining 26 went to pro-government coalitions. This includes only one female parliamentarian, a decrease from when four women first took office in 2009. Despite being the second GCC country to grant women the right to vote in parliamentary elections and hold office in 2005, Kuwait has the lowest proportion of female parliamentarians in the region. This mirrors the trend in the GCC countries with parliamentary elections that fewer women get elected than appointed.

Sultanate of Oman

After Bahrain, Oman is the second GCC country with a bicameral parliament. The Council of Oman consists of the State Council (Majlis al-Dawla), appointed by the Sultan, and the directly elected Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura), with both houses enjoying 86 seats designated to independents. This makes it the largest GCC parliament, who, like the aforementioned parliaments, propose and review laws and examine the annual budget. Yet,

in contrast, Oman's Shura Council can merely interpellate, but not dismiss, Ministers. In terms of passing laws, Oman's parliament is one of the least active in the GCC, having passed only 30 laws in the previous legislature. Oman established its first parliament, the State Consultative Council, which was fully appointed, in 1981. A decade later, it was transformed into Majlis al-Shura and a selected group of voters was allowed to choose its members. It was only in 1996 that the upper house, Majlis al-Dawla, was founded, forming the current bicameral parliament. Since 2003, universal suffrage was adopted, significantly expanding the pool of eligible voters. This included women who were the first in the GCC to gain the right to run in the Shura Council election in 1997 with two females elected to parliament accordingly. In the latest 2019 election, 2 women were elected to the Shura Council, while fifteen were appointed to the State Council.

State of Qatar

Qatar's unicameral parliament is known as the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura, Consultative Assembly). It is the smallest parliament in the Gulf region, currently holding 35 seats, which are all appointed by the Emir. This comes despite the 2004 Constitution, which stipulates that the Council should comprise of 45 members, 30 of whom are directly elected, and 15 of whom are royally appointed. Elections have been postponed several times; although, in the Council's 49th session, the Emir proclaimed that the first parliament elections will be held in October 2021. Despite this anomaly to the aforementioned parliaments,

their duties remain similar to them as members propose and consider laws, as well as approve the national budget. Moreover, they can interpellate and call a vote of confidence of Ministers like in Bahrain and Kuwait. The Shura Council was first formed in 1972 with 20 appointees, expanding its membership in the subsequent years. Females, however, only entered this equation in 2017 when four women, who are currently still in office, were first appointed to the parliament, making Qatar the last GCC country to do so.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's parliament, the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura), is unicameral, consisting of 150 members plus the speaker. It is the oldest parliament in the GCC, formed in 1927. However, unlike its GCC counterparts (except Qatar), members are not elected but appointed by the King for a four-year renewable term. In terms of their duties, it can discuss government reports as well as social and economic plans and it is the only GCC country where parliament has no oversight of the budget. Further, the Council cannot pass laws, but it may propose new laws or amendments to the existing ones. It can also seek accountability of Ministers through a request to the Prime Minister. In 2013, Saudi Arabia was the first GCC country to institute a quota reserving at least 20 percent of seats in the Shura Council for women. Accordingly, 30 women were appointed to the Council that year for the first time in the Kingdom's history, and continue to hold the same number of seats.

The United Arab Emirates

The UAE's unicameral parliament, the Federal National Council (FNC), is a manifestation of the country's federal system—it is comprised of 40 independent members, half of which are indirectly elected, while the remaining 20 are appointed by the rulers of each of the seven emirates, serving four-year terms. Each emirate can elect a fixed number of members based on the size of its population, with the largest amount assigned to Dubai and Abu Dhabi (8 each). Unlike its GCC counterparts, the Council does not propose laws; however, it can pass, amend or reject laws and review the general budget. It also debates international treaties and agreements along with other issues relevant to the Federation, and questions the Ministers' performance, although it cannot dismiss them. The FNC was formed under the Provisional Constitution in 1971, and, in 2006, the electoral college members voted in the first parliamentary election. In the same year, females were also given the right to vote and run for office and, consequently, one woman was elected, while eight women were appointed. Nine years later, the FNC appointed the first female Speaker, Amal Al-Qubaisi. A further progression occurred in 2019 as the UAE President ordered to raise female representation in the parliament to 50 percent, becoming the second Gulf country to implement a quota and taking the lead in the proportion of females in the GCC parliaments. Consequently, the latest 2019 FNC election saw for the first time equal gender representation, with seven women elected and thirteen appointed.

Shajarat-al-Hayat, Bahrain



EU-GCC Relations

Is There a Working EU-GCC Institutional Dynamic?

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It is a Herculean task to develop a historic storyline that properly depicts institution-to-institution relations and the idea of there being a unique European Union (EU)-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) relationship would cause allergic reactions among many experts and policy makers in both regions. Just as the states of the GCC tend to view the EU as the sum of its parts — the EU is not often regarded as an entity in its own right, but rather seen through the intergovernmental prism of French, German, Italian (etc) interests and foreign affairs endeavours. The EU has only a limited engagement with the GCC as an institution and often prefers bilateral relations with its six members (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) instead. It has not always been this way and it was certainly not the vision. In 1987, the Supreme Council of the GCC sought to open cooperation talks with the EC/EU. This morphed into the 1988 (in force since 1990) EC/EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement that established a Joint Council and a Joint Cooperation Committee primarily focused on developing trade relations. In theory, the Cooperation Agreement intended to lay the foundation for a workable EU-GCC Free Trade

Agreement (FTA) but this has failed to materialise over the subsequent decades. At first this was due to the EC/EU demand that the GCC establish its own Customs Union to ease trade. Then, when this requirement was achieved — in 1999 the GCC pledged to operate a unique Customs Union by 2005, successfully implemented ahead of schedule, in 2003 — other hurdles prevented agreement. Many suspect that the GCC states' raw buying power and tremendous petrochemical and hydrocarbon reserves intimidated EU trade negotiators and has acted as a spanner ever since. Negotiations on an FTA have been suspended since 2008. In contrast, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland — the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries — inked an FTA with the GCC in June 2009. Nevertheless, an ongoing, informal EU-GCC consultation framework continues to exist and has certainly helped both institutions, and their members, understand each other and take steps towards resuming free trade negotiations and, generally, better coordinate over other issues. Four instruments stand out as being central to enhancing EU-GCC relations going forward—perhaps to the point of an eventual FTA: 1) the EU-GCC Dialogue on Trade and Investment; 2) the EU-GCC Clean Energy Network;

3) the EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project; and 4) the Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach Project. It is no coincidence that the EU-GCC are able to cooperate on economic affairs—they derive important mutual gains. A quick look at the EU's trade statistics is revealing: the bloc is the GCC's second biggest trading partner, accounting for 12.3% of its total trade in goods (2020). And, according to the same data, 17.8% of the GCC's imports came from the EU; amounting to €97.1 billion. More interestingly, however, is that despite the raw value of trade, neither side has been able to reopen FTA negotiations. The EU and GCC may converge on economic interests, but their political calculations could scarcely be further apart. This has little to do with the internal affairs of the GCC but rather with the cacophony of interests the EU has come to represent—which, at times, fundamentally differ from that of its Member States', and hence, can result in the sending of mixed messages to the GCC. Whether referring to the arms industry, environmental concerns or human rights, the EU has a tendency to speak with many, often contradictory, voices. While the GCC also has its fair share of internal issues and intrigues, its members are far more united in

their wider strategic visions. The GCC seeks an FTA with the EU and is looking to end the impasse on their own terms. The question is whether the EU wants the same. Certainly, politics matters and the EU has prioritised issues of tying trade to human rights, often at the behest of the European Parliament. The GCC will have to showcase their impressive reforms — reflected in the Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE 2030 projects, the Kuwait 2035 project and the Oman 2040 project — and demonstrate the seriousness with which they take political reform. But what does the GCC ask of the EU? Surely, it is not about market access. Instead, the GCC wants to pursue their reform, modernisation and development model at their own pace and to trade as equals with the EU. Gone are the days when the Arab world could be treated as an auxiliary of European geopolitics or geoeconomics. The wider region has its own agency and the Arab Peninsula even more acutely so. The GCC has steadily — if haphazardly — been developing its own interests and the mechanisms to achieve them. If the EU wants to join the GCC and share in the spoils of rapid economic growth and development, the GCC is ready and willing to partner—in a fair and equal manner.

THE GULF CONNECTED

Integrating Transportation Infrastructure

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Over the past decades, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members have taken tremendous strides in developing their transportation infrastructure. Deeply aware of its importance for easing trade, tourism, attracting investments, enhancing mobility of the youthful populations and the overall economic diversification plans, the GCC countries have embarked on a journey towards integrating their networks. From urban systems to inter-city and trans-border connections, the GCC countries' transportation projects have increasingly blended the region's cultural heritage with modern technology.

Roads

With scattered population centres, abundant oil and decades of investment, the road network in the GCC has become the backbone of transportation and the countries boast a well-developed network of highways. The UAE, in particular, ranks 7th in the world in terms of quality of road infrastructure. For a snapshot of road development, turn to Saudi Arabia: The first phase of road development saw disjointed attempts to build roads linking important population centres, holy sites, as well as Aramco-built roads facilitating oil production. Saudi Arabia had only 239 kilometres (km) of paved roads by the time the Ministry

of Transportation was established in 1952 and no more than 8,000 km by 1970. The country entered the second phase in 1970, with the first five-year development programme, a large, systematic project for developing a road system for the country. Thanks to a major construction effort, there are now some 200,000 km of paved roads with a modern system of highways. A crucial project intended to bring the Arab Gulf countries closer even before the GCC's creation was the King Fahd Causeway linking Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, which was planned since the 1950s and finalised thirty years later. Until today, the King Fahd Causeway — at 25 km in length — ranks among the world's longest bridges. Yet, the GCC's longest bridge is Kuwait's 36 km long Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, built as part of the Silk City project under China's Belt and Road Initiative. And the construction boom continues: work to ease congestion and expand the highway network is planned in Bahrain with the Al-Fateh Highway, along with the proposal to construct a causeway between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Saudi Arabia also announced several projects in 2021, including a 400 km dual carriageway between Hail and Al-Ula. The case of the road networks illustrates the defining features of infrastructure development in the GCC: prodigious investment, state-driven and directed

development with an affinity for large infrastructure projects, all enabled by a windfall of oil proceeds. It also showcases the perks of regional cooperation: The Council has formed standards for road construction and connection between member states, facilitated knowledge exchange in engineering and engaged itself in road safety and traffic control.

Ports

Situated along key trade routes connecting Asia with Europe, ports on the Red Sea as well as the Arabian Gulf are important nodes in global supply chains. The largest cargo port in the GCC is the Port of Jebel Ali, southwest of Dubai, the world's 9th busiest port and the largest container port between Rotterdam and Singapore. Jebel Ali is being expanded in line with the UAE's vision for diversifying its economy. The same is true for the other large ports in the GCC, namely Saudi Arabia's Jeddah Port and Qatar's Hamad Port. However, these investments and capacity expansion are at risk. Analysts have identified the danger of overcapacity, pointing out that global trade would have to grow quickly to utilise all this proposed space, with projections rendering it unrealistic. And, that was before the COVID-19 pandemic, which considerably disrupted production, depressed international trade and laid bare the vulnerabilities of off-shore supply chains. Whether global trade will bounce back to its former levels remains to be seen, but the crisis has certainly changed the calculations for this particular ambition.

Railways

In contrast to a world-class system of

roads, the rail transport sector in the GCC is fairly underdeveloped. Saudi Arabia has some 5,000 km of railways, the UAE has urban rail transport, but almost nothing beyond that, Qatar has the Doha Metro and is building another in Lusail, while Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman do not have any railways as of yet. But in keeping with the GCC's infrastructure focus, planning and construction is underway on multiple railway projects. The foremost among these is the Gulf Railway, a project designed to link all six GCC states together by rail. The project almost epitomises the GCC as an organisation — it will include the six countries' individual domestic railway systems that will flow into the wider GCC network. Approved in 2009, the project encompasses 2,117 km of railway, connecting populations, boosting intra-GCC trade and enabling easier freight transport while decreasing carbon footprints. Initially, the project was scheduled for completion in 2018, but it ran into a series of difficulties and was put on the back-burner. Lowering oil prices tightened budgets and the Qatar crisis put the whole plan in jeopardy, forcing designs to be altered. The completion date was pushed back to 2021 and the current estimate is 2023. The Gulf Railway plans are back on track to an extent, and UAE's Etihad Rail is working on Phase 2 of its domestic rail network, which will link it to Saudi Arabia in the west, and to Oman in the east. Kuwait is starting the design work of its part of the railway this year, using a Public-Private Partnership model that is making its way into more and more infrastructure projects in the GCC.

The transportation sector in the GCC is reflective of its character as a region. It is shaped by state planning, defined by oil, dependent on world trade and still growing rapidly thanks to massive investment and a forward-looking vision. But it also reflects challenges. Its optimistic port expansions may end up underutilised if the trade the region depends on slows and its joint railway

must overcome diplomatic hurdles and the realities of an economy dependent on the fortunes of a single commodity. For all the challenges that are present however, modernising infrastructure in the Gulf is the only way to better integrate the various states in the region to each other and to the global economy and that is a collective good.

