



The Gulf Cooperation Council: How Functional is it?

Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi: Ne Derece Fonksiyonel Bir Teşkilat?

İbrahim KARATAŞ^a

Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established to secure its six members from external threats, mainly Iran and Iraq, but failed to realize this goal due to several reasons. First, this study argues that since the GCC is unable to ensure their security, member states looked for foreign protectors. Second, the enmity among members stems from cross-borders conflicts, which they could avoid intervening. Third, in line with the theory, countries having security problems can hardly form a well-established IGO (inter-governmental organization), and the situation of the GCC complies with the theory. Finally, the GCC has more candidates for leadership, thus they face difficulties in forming an alliance. Consequently, the future of the GCC does not look brilliant and it might remain as an organization having a very little function. The study is expected to contribute the literature of the Middle East by examining factors that led to the inefficiency of the GCC. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used for writing the article.

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council, Middle East, Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Iran.

^a Assoc. Prof., Independent Researcher, ibratas@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-2125-1840.

Bu makaleye atıf için / To cite this article: Karataş İ., (2025). The Gulf Cooperation Council: How Functional is it? Toplum ve Kimlik Dergisi, 2(1), 78-96, Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.14789807

Geliş Tarihi (Received): 01.11.2024 / Revizyon (Revision): 23.11.2024 / Kabul Tarihi (Accepted): 05.12.2024

Öz

Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi (KİK) altı üyesini başta İran ve Irak olmak üzere dış tehditlere karşı korumak amacıyla kurulmuş, ancak çeşitli nedenlerle bu amacını gerçekleştirememiştir. Bu çalışma ilk olarak KİK'in kendi güvenliğini sağlayamaması nedeniyle üye devletlerin yabancı koruyucular aradığını vurgulamaktadır. İkincisi, üyeler arasındaki düşmanlık, kendi aralarındaki meselelerden değil, sınır ötesi çatışmalardan kaynaklanmaktadır. Üçüncüsü, teoriye uygun olarak, güvenlik sorunları olan ülkelerin köklü bir hükümetler arası teşkilat oluşturması zordur ve KİK'in durumu teoriye uygundur. Son olarak, KİK'in liderlik için çok aday olduğu için bir ittifak oluşturmakta zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadırlar. Sonuç olarak, KİK'in geleceği parlak görünmemektedir ve çok az işlevi olan bir örgüt olarak kalması muhtemeldir. Bu çalışmanın, KİK'in verimsizliğine yol açan faktörleri inceleyerek Orta Doğu literatürüne katkıda bulunması beklenmektedir. Makalenin yazımında hem nitel hem de nicel araştırma yöntemleri kullanılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi, Orta Doğu, Körfez Ülkeleri, Suudi Arabistan, İran.

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is going through hard times since it was established in 1981. Although being a political and economic alliance like the EU and ASEAN, it is far from realizing its basic goals due to deep discord among the six members. While only Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and partly the UAE (United Arab Emirates) act in conformity in regional politics, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman opt for a more independent stance, thereby raising concerns into mind about the future of the GCC. There are vital problems that threaten the intergovernmental organization such as geopolitics, continuous conflicts, wars, lack of trust among states, fear of Iran, external interventions, popular unrests, priorities of members, and so on. Particularly, the security problem stemming from mentioned reasons compels GCC States to act independently from each other. In addition, the vast amount of hydrocarbon revenues gives more confidence to the member countries and encourage them to determine their own foreign policies independent from the leading country, Saudi Arabia. Therefore,

besides external threats, rivalry among the GCC States deepens the rift to grow larger. We may expect that GCC States' incompatible policies might make the organization less functional or even turn it into an institution with only a nameplate.

This study aims to reveal what is going wrong in the alliance of Gulf countries by analyzing root problems, which threatens peace and security especially in the Gulf and generally in the Middle East. Our first hypothesis is that a harmonized foreign policy of member states could not be realized since it is very difficult to form a political, economic and a military alliance at the same time. Even the EU has not achieved such a comprehensive goal. Second, the GCC seems not an institution of partnership but rather a bloc led by a regional hegemon; Saudi Arabia. In other words, the GCC resembles the US-led Western bloc during the Cold War rather than the EU, which does not allow a super or superior power to dominate the union, and allow members to have their own foreign policies. In fact, the EU is trying to form a common foreign policy but does not pressure members to adopt it. On the contrary, the GCC states favor adopting single policies, which are not in favor of all. Particularly some countries' independent foreign policies and their desire to be regional players create a leadership problem in the GCC. We can argue that there is more than one leader; power relations are no longer asymmetric; and this new situation impedes the harmony among members of the Council. Moreover, it should be added that the Saudi leadership's failure to protect its allies has forced other members to find new ways to secure themselves. Third, foreign intervention of member states cause turmoil both in the intervened countries and in the GCC as they support different parties in regional conflicts. Their rivalry outside the GCC has had repercussions in the organization, and affected their relations. In addition, while the GCC States fail to secure themselves, they still involve in regional conflicts. Hence, as this study argues, the security dilemma is both an issue they strive to address and one to which they simultaneously contribute. In other words, there is a vicious circle that engulf Gulf countries into the conflict(s).

Methodologically, a literature review was done for the examination of the subject. Articles, news stories, NGO reports, and books elucidating the organization were reviewed, and foreign policies of member states, which are generally not in harmony with each other, were compared. Besides, some interviews were conducted with the experts of the subject. In terms of the scope, we limited our analysis with foreign policies of the GCC States and ignored their economic, domestic and social policies. The characteristics of each state's foreign policy is examined so as to understand the personality of the organization. While much has been

written about each GCC State, there are few studies about why the organization fails to meet expectations and what might happen in the future. This study is expected to fill this gap with its own theoretical approach.

2. Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs)

The GCC is an intergovernmental organization (IGO), which is defined by the Union of International Associations (UIA) as “an organization composed primarily of sovereign states and established by a treaty or other agreements that act as a charter creating the group (UIA, 2020)”. According to Law (2013: 4), IGOs were assumed as instruments through which states could seek their interests in the international and regional arena. They are also bodies facilitating cooperation among states (Keohane, 1984). According to the UN, for an organization to be intergovernmental, it should comprise three or more parties and be established with an agreement, which make members subject to international law and render their decisions binding. Yet, according to Wallace and Singer (1970), two sovereign governments are enough for an IGO. Such organizations do not replace governments but they still have a governmental body that issues norms, rules, structures, and so on. In addition, each member gives up some of its sovereignty for the sake of cooperation after joining the organization. The first IGOs were established to facilitate cross-border services such as postal services and transportation. As economic and technologic development has boosted from the late 19th century onwards, the role of IGOs have become more vital as well as more complicated. IGOs may be single-issue, multi-issue, regional or international organizations such as the UN, the EU, the African Union, the GCC, the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the ASEAN (The Association of South Asian Nations) and the WHO (World Health Organization), promoting regional economic, security, military and political cooperation, and so on.

IGOs have several roles. First, they are necessary to uphold peace and security among states regionally or/and internationally. For instance, the United Nations is serving states to solve their disputes through mediation, putting embargoes on misbehaving states, and enabling the use of force through its Security Council. Second, IGOs help governments to boost economic cooperation, prepare regulations for the standardization of international trade and steer the flow of goods, and so on. The World Trade Organization (WTO) is a good example of IGOs that coordinates international trade with rules and regulations. Third, IGOs also help states to solve common global problems such as environment, health and migration. Regarding debates

about IGOs, according to McCormick (1980: 79), since regional IGOs are composed of states with similar politics, economics and culture, they easily provide cooperation among members while global IGOs are more heterogeneous in their nature, complicating cooperation. However, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020) argues that IGOs with global members have higher survivability than regional organizations since their heterogeneous structure and broad functional remit help them diversify their activities, increase their adaptability and reduce vulnerability against issue-specific or geographical shocks. On the other hand, East (1973: 559) argues that small states are less cooperative inside IGOs due to their few resources they must allocate for foreign affairs. Yet, whether small, middle or a superpower, states tend to be more cooperative when they are a member of an IGO (McCormick, 1980: 84).

What is more, an IGO gives legitimacy to an action, which a state cannot do alone. It also ensures checks and balances among member states and enables equal representation of members, regardless of their size (Law, 2013: 4). While liberals argue that IGOs promote peace, maximize gains and encourage further integration among states, realists claim that an IGO might turn into a tool of the more powerful member, which may dominate all decisions, push others into risks for its interests or remain ignorant when a matter is clashing with its foreign policy. Realists also answer why small states still join IGOs. According to Mearsheimer (2001: 162), weaker states align or bandwagon stronger ones to secure themselves. They also create alliances to balance power against their adversaries. While military alliances are not IGOs, there are the ones that transformed themselves into IGO with an agreement, e.g. NATO. In the same vein, an IGO might be established as an alliance, too. For instance, as will be explained below, the GCC is both an IGO and alliance aiming to secure its members from foreign threats. However, as Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020) contends, security-oriented intergovernmental organizations are more likely to terminate during geographical upheavals that undermine their *raison d'être*, which is indeed the case for the GCC that failed to be functional during geographical shocks. As will be elucidated below, when the problem of security is not solved, members look for other ways to defend themselves and leave the IGO(s) obsolete. In this respect, they also lose unity, co-work, co-operation and a common foreign policy. Thus, it can be argued that for an IGO to survive, it must ensure the survival of its members (high politics) first. Other issues of low politics are more easy to agree on and act together. This argument is supported by McCormick and Kihl (1979: 500) who claim that countries tend to avoid utilizing IGOs for high-politics in their foreign policy while they use them extensively for low-politics.

By analyzing the GCC below, this study argues that modern organizations may not fit into outdated political systems. The Gulf political culture is slowly adapting to contemporary political system but there is a long way to go. It is difficult to perpetuate an organization, e.g. an IGO, in a region where administrative systems are yet to be coherent with the contemporary world. For instance, since tribalism is influential in the Arab world, it is not strange that the older man, the bigger community or the more powerful country to be obeyed. This being the case in the Gulf, norms like equal representation, co-decisions and different voices may mean disaccord rather than accordance. Thus, the failure of an IGO in such circumstances should not sound weird.

3. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The GCC is a regional intergovernmental organization founded in 1981 by Arab states neighboring the Persian Gulf, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. The only exception is Iraq. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the GCC States feared the spread of Shia ideology in the region. Thus, when Iran-Iraq War began in 1980, they supported Iraq and saw it as a bulwark against the Iranian incursion (Salisbury, 2018: 11). Their aid to Iraq totaled almost \$50 billion during the war (Wright, 2011: 87). Eventually, seeing that both Iran and Iraq are two regional threats to themselves, they established the GCC in 1981. All six members are monarchies, including constitutional monarchies of Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. The aim of the organization is stated as promoting security, economic, cultural and social cooperation among members that have similar political systems, common culture and geographical proximity (Al Jazeera, 2017). GCC institutions are modeled on the European Union (Legrenzi, 2002: 26). It has six branches, which are the Supreme Council, the Secretariat-General, the Ministerial Council, the Consultative Commission, the Secretary-General and the Commission for the Settlement of Disputes.

Member states have achieved several goals like customs union, common market and common security force called “the Peninsula Shield”. Founded in 1984, the military arm of the GCC (The Peninsula Shield) consisted of two brigades with 10.000 soldiers in order to deter potential enemies and defend the GCC States. The joint military force was operational during the first Gulf War in 1991, the second Gulf War in 2003 and the Bahraini Uprising in 2011. Yet, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar did not send troops to Bahrain despite the fact that they supported the Bahraini government. However, the Peninsula Shield has failed to be a real military alliance as the member states preferred to rely on external powers, particularly the United States for their security. (Slijper, 2017: 12).

Another failure occurred monetary union. Except for the UAE and Oman, other members took major steps to introduce a single currency called *Khaleeji* in 2014. Yet, Oman refused the proposal, claiming that its economy was too weak for a common currency. The UAE, on the other hand, opposed it since the concerning institution would not be located in its territories. In addition, an EU-like union was also on agenda but Oman rejected it and threatened to leave the GCC (Cafiero & Karasik, 2016: 9). Furthermore, there were attempts to enlarge the Council by allowing Morocco, Yemen and Jordan to join but no developments have been witnessed about their membership until recently.

The GCC States are unable to secure their countries on their own as they are small states except for the only middle power, Saudi Arabia. However, even Saudi Arabia could not defend itself against regional threats, thus it opted for regional and global alliances since its foundation in 1932. During the first years of the GCC, the Gulf States had to tackle with relatively more powerful neighbors; Iraq and Iran. When Iran was balanced by Iraq in the 1980s, the GCC members got relieved and funded Iraq's war for their own security and partly for Sunni sentiments. Perhaps, supporting a likely enemy against another one was rarely implemented by other IGOs. The literature suggests states establish IGOs for their interests including their security. However, in the case of the GCC, besides combining their powers, member states collaborated (or partly relied on) another power, namely Iraq, to protect themselves.

Iraq itself was a threat as well. Eventually, it invaded Kuwait in 1990 and showed how an unreliable Sunni neighbor it was. What is worse, it was not the GCC's military forces but the US-led international coalition with 700.000 troops that rescued Kuwait from Iraqi invasion (Elashmawy, 2014: 217). Despite the US-led intervention, the Iraqi threat continued until 2003 when the U.S. invaded it again and toppled Saddam Hussain. The difference between the two wars was that the GCC States were reluctant to support the U.S. in the second war due to the Arab people's reaction. On the other hand, whether they predicted before or not, the elimination of Iraq led to the rise of Iran in the region and its political control over Iraq. Iran's expansionist policies raised concerns among all member states and made them look for other ways like finding greater actors to secure their sovereignty as it was clear that the GCC was not militarily strong enough to defend itself.

Besides threats coming from Iran and Iraq, a third factor or threat that shook the council came from inside; popular unrests for democratization against authoritarian regimes, namely the

Arab Spring. The breakout of the Arab Spring culminated in the overthrow of some dictatorial regimes that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain had supported (Kabalan, 2018). When Bin Ali of Tunisia, Mubarak of Egypt and Saleh of Yemen lost power, and the unrest reached Bahrain, Saudis and the UAE feared that the political structure of the region would totally change. While oppressing their own opposition and giving subsidies to their people in order to appease them, they also launched counter-revolutions in the countries where there were uprisings. Yet, they were selective in their involvement. While they supported dictators in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen, they sided with people and rebel groups in Syria and Libya. One of the things that the Arab Spring revealed was that the GCC States diverged in their reaction to the revolutions (Kamrava, 2012: 97). The Arab Spring also exacerbated ongoing rifts among members, for example, eventually resulting in the blockade of Qatar in 2017. Jordanian academician Ali Bakeer said in the interview conducted for this study that the dysfunctional status of the organization became a fact especially in the aftermath of the 2017 GCC crisis, and the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia and UAE against Qatar (Bakeer, 2020).

4. Why is the GCC Less Influential?

The GCC is an IGO, which was established due to the fear of losing their security and/or sovereignty. It is not like the EU, which was established to prevent wars and enmity, and does not aim to form a political unity following economic integration. In the GCC's case, unlike the EU, enemies were not inside but outside, at least this was the reality until the Arab Spring. However, enemies (Iran and Iraq) were not too far but just on other shores of the Persian Gulf. While Iran was threatening with Shia expansionism, Iraq was putting forward Baathist ideology, i.e. Arab nationalism. Both ideologies didn't match those of the Gulf states and threatened social and religious structure of them. On the other hand, while Iraq benefited from Sunni card by receiving aid from the GCC States, they were well aware that Iraq could attack them, had they not funded Hussain regime's war. Therefore, the formation of the GCC was a *sine qua non* for the Gulf countries in order to unite against foes and deter them.

From the beginning of the establishment of the GCC, member states pursued a policy of remaining neutral or appeasing countries like Iraq with billions of US dollars. Yet, this strategy did not always work. For instance, despite the vast fiscal assistance to the Iraqi regime, Kuwait could not save itself from Saddam Hussain's aggression, and was invaded by the Iraqi troops in 1990. Factors like Kuwait's wealth, Iraq's \$120 billion post-war debts, and historical claims of Iraq on Kuwait all contributed to Hussain regime's decision to invade

(Alazemi, 2013: 346). The GCC States, except for Oman, sent the Peninsula Shield troops to fight together with US-led coalition but the victory belonged to foreign forces rather than them. The Gulf War of 1991 showed that no Gulf country could defend itself neither alone nor by combining their powers. Further to this fact, another fact was that Saudi Arabia as the leader of the union would not be able to protect its allies. Consequently, the Gulf alliance proved itself to be useless against external attacks as one of their members, Kuwait, was freed by other forces. Thus, member states looked for external protectorates and pursued more independent foreign policies which are analyzed in the following sub-sections.

Beginning to analyze the GCC states with Oman, it maintained its relations with both Iraq and Iran, thereby acting alone across the war in 1980s (Al-Rahma, 2015: 5). One of the reasons may be that Omanis have a local sect called Ibadi, which is neither Sunni nor Shia (Jones, 2014: 2). Moreover, Omanis did not cut their ties with Egypt after the Camp David Accords in 1978 (Akseki, 2010: 1). Oman has perhaps the most unique foreign policy in the Gulf, which is based on pragmatism, independence and moderation. Another peculiar characteristic that Sultan Qaabus was being an active regional player through mediation diplomacy. Omanis are cautious about not taking part in any war or conflict and eager to play the mediator role between parties. In addition, Omani diplomacy is so subtle that Omanis' mediation often goes unnoticed.

While this active foreign policy makes Oman neutral and friend of all states, it also reveals that Oman adheres to the principle of 'isolationism with active diplomacy', meaning that it does not align entirely with a state or group of states. It is true that Oman is mediating well between conflicting parties but this policy also leads other GCC members to perceive Oman as not fully fulfilling its responsibilities within the organization. For example, opting for a neutral posture during the Iran-Iraq War saved Oman but disrupted the unity and harmony among the GCC States, thus making its membership less meaningful due to its minimal contribution to the GCC's goals. Oman's unusual foreign policy also contradicts with the theories about IGOs. While such organizations are formed for common interests and policies, Oman's position in the GCC neither added value nor caused setbacks to the Council.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, its leadership in the Gulf has always been conspicuous and controversial. The Saudi regime have used oil in exchange for their security since their independence (Nuruzzaman, 2019: 9). Thanks to the black gold, it received the support of the West against regional and global powers. It was this very Western support by which it

protected themselves from pan-Arabist, sectarian and non-local Islamist movements. In addition, it struggled for the leadership of the Arab World. However, it was careful about not getting involved in regional conflicts. Instead of using hard power, it wielded soft power and won its wars without firing a single bullet (Kabalan, 2018). For example, it directly confronted neither with Iran nor Israel but rather supported other Arab states that were fighting them. Besides, they specifically prevent any external power to intervene in countries in the Arab Peninsula. Establishing the GCC was a Saudi idea and fiscally they still cover more than half of organizational expenses. In addition, it has the largest population and economy in the GCC. Since being the only middle power in the GCC, it undertook the leadership of the council. Until the early 1990s, it was the absolute decision-maker in the GCC. Other members rarely objected Saudis' decisions and accepted a foreign policy parallel to Saudi Arabia.

However, when the Gulf War disclosed the weakness of Saudi Arabia against its enemies, they looked for other protectors and raised their voices against the Saudi leadership. The 1990s were the years when other GCC states looked for new ways to secure themselves. Yet, the more they acted independently the more Saudi regime put pressure on them except for Oman. It can be argued that because of Saudi Arabia's power-based politics, the GCC differs from the EU, where great, middle, small and micro states have equal say in decision-making. While the Saudi regime holds absolute power and full control, others are expected to follow their paths and obey directives. With its current (and past) structure, the GCC looks like America's unquestioned leadership in the Western bloc during the Cold War, where the U.S. took the lead while other nations followed roles assigned by America.

The developments have shown that since member states do not accept Saudi pressure and go on their own way in their foreign policies, the functionality of the GCC has eroded. For example, the UAE has been pursuing an assertive and active foreign policy since the early 2000s. In the same vein, it relied on its soft power to attract foreign investors and tourists as well as re-branding the country in order to increase its reputation (Ibish, 2017: 1). Moreover, by diversifying its economic sources, it has become a richer country in the region. The more powerful it got, the more active it became in the regional and international politics. Unlike conservative Saudi Arabia, which exports Wahhabist ideology, the UAE inclines towards modernism (Slijper, 2017: 9). However, they act together with Saudi Arabia in intervening regional conflicts. This study argues that currently, it is not Saudi Arabia but the UAE that

shapes politics in the Arab Street. Khaled Yusuf, an Egyptian political refugee based in Istanbul, also claimed in the interview we conducted that the UAE is the most influential country in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East (Yusuf, 2020).

Indeed, it was the UAE that first attempted to make a peace deal with Israel, while others overtly or covertly supported the initiative. It is also no secret that the Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman follows the path of his counterpart Muhammad bin Zayed. The UAE also got directly involved in the Libyan civil war, has stronger ties with Al Sisi of Egypt, tries to influence politics of Tunisia, and re-opened its embassy in Damascus before others. Assuming for a while that the Saudi regime might seek to regain its leadership in the Gulf, it is less likely that the UAE will align with the Saudi regime, if alignment doesn't serve its interests.

Qatar has completely distanced its foreign policy from that of the other GCC members, often unsettling them with its independent and maverick approach to diplomacy (Fuller, 2014). When Qatar's former Emir Hamad bin Khalifa took power from his father with a bloodless coup in 1995, he followed a foreign policy independent from Saudi Arabia (Peterson, 2006: 742). Saudis backed a counter coup against Emir Hamad in 1996 but failed and worsened relations. Before taking power, Emir Hamad was blaming his father Emir Khalifa for being too loyal to Saudi Arabia and not pursuing an independent foreign policy. Therefore, Emir Hamad overthrew his father and split from Saudi Arabia. Since then, Qatar's relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have never been at a satisfactory level. This has led to the severing of diplomatic relations and a physical blockade by some GCC members and other Arab countries. However, Qatar's response with its soft power seems to have enabled it to withstand against pressure.

Qatar does not act with other members and generally supports the opposite party in the current shifted from mediation to intervention during the Arab Spring, further enraging the Gulf states. Although having a monarchy system, Qatar supported popular uprisings against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, arguing that political participation would bring peace to the region. On the other hand, Egyptian journalist Muhammad Jamal argues that Qatar thought that allying with groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudis, Bahrainis and the UAE see as political Islamists threatening the Middle East, would increase its influence in the region and enable it to challenge its hostile neighbors. Qatar is

perhaps the only GCC state neither aligning with Saudi Arabia. It has a different foreign policy agenda and does not seem to renounce it.

Regarding Kuwait, it supports the GCC's unity in order to deal with regional threats (CRS, 2019: 12). In fact, it mediated in regional conflicts and donated vast amounts of aid in the 1980s, including supporting Iraq's war against Iran (Naser, 2017: 104). Yet, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, it tried to ensure its security with regional and international alliances. Therefore, for the sake of its sovereignty, it acts in the GCC consensus in spite of not always agreeing with other members on some issues. In fact, Kuwait has no other choice as its geopolitical location, military weakness, demographics, regional and international environment compel it to form alliances (Alazemi, 2013).

As for Bahrain, the smallest and the poorest country in the Gulf, it has always bandwagoned to Saudi Arabia in order to save its sovereignty, perfectly complying with the realist arguments. Being so weak and having a Shia majority have made the Kingdom to hide behind Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Bahrain could repel an Iran backed coup attempt in 1981 and the uprising of 2011 with the help of Saudi Arabia (Çetinoğlu, 2010: 93). However, being so embedded to Saudi Arabia has prevented Bahraini regime to make reforms in political system (Kinninmont, 2012: 2). Therefore, the uprising of 2011 has been contained but not resolved permanently (Ulrichsen, 2013: 1). Although an independent foreign policy will make Bahrain more vulnerable against its enemies, dependency on Saudis makes it look like a semi-sovereign state.

5. Independent Foreign Policies and the GCC

This study argues that as all the GCC States have an active and independent foreign policy, except for Bahrain, the GCC becomes less functional. Beginning with Oman, it is the most independent member with a neutral but active diplomacy. It hesitates to take sides. Yet, if there is injustice in a case and member states of an IGO are required to take action, non-action might be regarded as escaping from the duty. Oman's isolationist and independent foreign policy from the GCC could ensure its sovereignty but we should note that it was the Council that prepared a \$10 billion aid package to help the Omani government when protests erupted in 2011 (Valeri, 2014, 3). Thus, it can be argued that Oman does not isolate itself from the GCC. Oman got closer to the GCC by ratifying several security agreements after the aid but it continues to pursue an independent foreign policy. Kuwait might be a good inspiration for

Oman in regard to mediation diplomacy. Although Kuwaitis were active in diplomacy and donation, they could not escape from Saddam Hussain regime. Yet, Kuwait would not have been invaded, had it accepted the deployment of foreign troops, a strategy Omanis implemented long before all the GCC members.

On the other hand, Qataris began a similar active and independent diplomacy that focused on mediation. Actually, their ambition to be the ‘Geneva of the Mashreq’ through ‘preventive diplomacy’ worked well for a while (Abdullah, 2014). However, the Arab Spring forced all Council members to change their foreign policy once again due to opportunities and threats it offered. They thought that popular participation in a political system would de-radicalize population. Qatar’s interventionist policy was also a result of its rich population that were too rich to protest their government (Elashmawy, 2014: 14). However, except for Oman, Qatar’s diplomacy was not in compliance with the other GCC members that supported authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Therefore, a hostile contention started between the two sides. Moreover, although five GCC states were on the same side in Libya, Syria and Yemen, they differed in the course of time since they opted for different rebel groups. In Yemen, Qatar was even ousted from coalition forces due to the ongoing strife. As of 2024, i.e. thirteen years after the Arab Spring, it can be concluded that Qatar did not get what it expected from the Arab uprisings.

The crucial problem with all the GCC states is that although they had a perpetual security problem, they began to follow a maverick diplomacy and intervened domestic affairs of other Arab states from the Arab Spring onwards. To intervene and maximize interests, a state must be a great power or a member of a strong alliance. In other words, it should already be powerful state or get the support of friendly countries. For instance, the U.S., the U.K, Russia, China, etc. can side with a party in conflicts as they can handle it and protect their interests. Yet, this is not the case for the GCC member states, including the only middle power, Saudi Arabia, since they themselves might encounter similar riots seen during the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, except for Oman, all countries supported either side in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Tunisia and Syria. Yet, the result seems not to be in favor of any GCC member.

Besides gaining the hostility of rioters or regimes, GCC states became hostile to each other as well. For example, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar after failing to change Doha’s position against the Morsi government of the MB in 2014 (Baabood, 2014: 43). In 2017, this time Egypt joined the three countries and blockaded Qatar

from air, sea and land. The four countries accused Qatar of supporting terrorism, namely MB and Hamas, maintaining good relations with Iran, and meddling in internal affairs of other countries (Al Jazeera, 2017). However, arguments of blockaders were refused by Doha. The Qatari regime argued that; 1). Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which blockaders call terrorist organizations, have nothing to do with the four countries except for the position of MB in Egypt. Abdennour Toumi, An Algerian analyst said in an interview specifically carried out for this study via Whatsapp that it is the perceived threat of political Islam against their regimes that deteriorates Qatar's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Toumi, 2020), 2). the UAE had good commercial relations with Iran as well; 3). not only Qatar but blockading countries also intervened internal affairs of other countries.

In addition, paradoxically, the UAE realigned with Iran after the Iranian forces downed a US drone over the Strait of Hormuz in 2019 while at the same time it continued the blockade against Qatar to forge good ties with the Iranian regime. Another contradictory policy of blockaders and some other Arab countries against Qatar is about Doha regime's relations with Israel. Qatar began to establish diplomatic relations with Israel in 1997. Right after the commencement of good ties, it faced harsh criticism from Arab states. Yet, as of 2020, the UAE and Bahrain signed a peace deal with Israel and their allies support the deal. Overall, the GCC states, including pro-active Qatar and excluding isolated Oman, throw their weight concerning regional issues, and their policies cause contention against each other.

Finally, the weak military power of the GCC states is also a significant problem that impacts the functionality of the organization. In 2018, Saudi Arabia was the largest importer of arms that valued \$3.81 billion. The UAE was the 8th with \$1. 1 billion and Qatar was the 9th with \$816 million (Army Technology, 2019). However, making the Gulf an arsenal does not make states feel secure, thereby they ask external protectors to save their country. Indeed, without a great external power, no Gulf country can preserve its sovereignty. They might have arms but their armies are small in numbers and poorly-trained. Therefore, converting oil to money, and money to weapons is still not enough to maintain the security of a country due to the lack of human power. Since all Gulf States are aware of this fact, they saw wings of the U.S. as a sanctuary for themselves and invited U.S. troops to deploy on their territories.

Oman was the first country that allowed Washington to use its military bases through an agreement signed in 1981 (Dazi-Heni 2017, 7). On the other hand, there are 13.500 U.S. troops in Kuwait, over 8.000 in Bahrain, 5.000 in the UAE, 11.000 in Qatar and 500 in Saudi

Arabia (CRS, 2019: 8; CRS, 2016: 19; Slijper, 2017: 10). It is estimated that there are 35.000 U.S. troops deployed in the Gulf. Besides that, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) is based in Doha. In addition to American forces, Qatar has two Turkish military bases. Moreover, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait are negotiating with the UK for military cooperation and the use of bases. While the U.S. army was voluntarily invited to protect hosting countries from external threats, currently, it protects the Gulf countries from each other as well. According to Khalid Bin Muhammad Al Attiyah, former Qatari foreign minister, Qatar would be invaded by blockading countries, had there not been Turkish and US bases in Qatar. Kuwaitis also disclose their fear of being invaded by Saudi Arabia behind closed doors. An anonymous Kuwaiti scholar argued that the blockaders of Qatar planned Qatar to be invaded by the UAE and Kuwait by Saudi Arabia.

Consequently, it can be contended that the GCC is an organization whose members are potential invaders and invadees of each other, a situation that does not allow the Council to ferment and cement unity among its members. Several factors have brought them to this point. First, all members are aware that being under the roof of the GCC will not save their states. Thus, they prefer to find external powers to protect themselves. Probably, none of states will give up deploying foreign armies on its territory. From another aspect, this means that the GCC is obsolete in terms of security. As Saudis testified during Bush and Obama administrations, the U.S. may not always side with Gulf countries against their enemies. In addition, the U.S. as an external protector comes at a high price (Wright, 2011: 92). In fact, the best choice is to unite military powers but intra-organization contention, preferences and priorities does not allow it. Consequently, Szalai's 'swing states' model applies to all member states, including Saudi Arabia, which is relatively a great power. 'Swing states' refers to "Those actors which can maintain relations with many players and put more emphasis on case-by-case cooperation than on long-term alliances (Szalai, 2017: 13)."

Second, all six members are more or less intervening in regional and international politics (Young, 2016: 1). Yet, since their policies were clashing in regional conflicts, they later began to be hostile to each other. However, the Arab Spring has shown that they all failed, lost money and gained hostility of people. Such failure may be read as the proof that they are not capable of achieving/preventing regime changes. Besides, the interventionist policies hit themselves rather than conflicting parties in other states, showing that what causes to the strife are the problems that are not concerning member countries so much. In other words, their outside rivalry makes them hostile to each other. Third, as the theory puts forward, it is less

likely that countries having security problems can form a firm IGO. Even the EU could not have been established, had there not been NATO and the U.S., which ensured Europe's security against the Soviet Union. Therefore, security pillar of the GCC is missing. There are more commonalities than divergences but clashing policies does not allow the Council to be an EU like organization. Fourth, based on the previous reason, three GCC members have different and selfish foreign policies with clashing interests (IPI, 2013). In other words, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia behave like leaders rather than ordinary allies, and they will hardly act together behind the same roof. This study argues that the more leaders an IGO has, the less unity it will have.

Although all major regional organizations were founded for security rather than other reasons like economic benefits, and the GCC was established for the same reason, the organization fails to realize its main goal which is to maintain the security and survival of its members. Hence, it should not be surprising that the functionality of the GCC never reached to the expected level. Due to this fact, questions about the future of the Council have been raised. On the other hand, this situation strengthens the argument of Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020), who claims regional IGOs have less percentage of survivability as opposed to global IGOs.

6. Conclusion

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an intergovernmental organization, was founded to enable six Gulf countries to cooperate with each other against Iranian and Iraqi threats at the beginning of 1980s. However, it was understood in the course of time that member states alone or together are not able to secure their sovereignties against external threats. Therefore, they relied on the U.S. for their security, indirectly implying that the GCC cannot be a military alliance. Saudi Arabia's incapability to defend its neighbors was also a factor that led the Gulf states to leave their security to the hands of greater powers. After the first Gulf War, while Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE enjoyed similar policies, Oman kept itself away from any conflict, and Kuwait reluctantly followed the Saudi-Bahraini-UAE coalescence. In fact, the UAE also acts independently and more aggressively than Saudi Arabia but it still prefers to be seen in the same frame with Saudi Arabia. Eventually, disagreements between members and growing revenues disrupted the harmony among states.

This study has laid down several reasons for why the GCC does not function at desired level. First, it argued that the GCC is unable to ensure their security, thus they looked for foreign

protectors. Second, the enmity among members stems from cross-borders conflicts, which they unnecessarily intervened. Third, as per the theory, countries having security problems can hardly form a well-established IGO, and the situation of the GCC complies with the theory. Finally, the GCC has more candidates for leadership, thus they face difficulties in forming an alliance. On the other hand, the study also argues that so much strife has negatively affected the GCC, and probably the Council may never fulfill its goals as there is more divergence than unity among members. Thus, the GCC states do not have a common foreign policy despite the fact that they have common threats. As a result, the organization may look like a regional Arab cultural and economic association with no significant duties in the future.

References

- Abdullah, J. (2014). *Analysis: Qatar's Foreign Policy - The Old and The New*. Al Jazeera.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/11/analysis-qatar-foreign-policy--2014111811274147727.html>, Accessed on 25.03.2019.
- Akseki, E. (2010). *Oman's Foreign Policy Between 1970-2008*. Unpublished Master Thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara.
- Alazemi, T. (2013). *Kuwaiti Foreign Policy In Light Of The Iraqi Invasion, With Particular Reference To Kuwait's Policy Towards Iraq, 1990-2010*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, Exeter.
- Al Jazeera. (2017). *What is The GCC?* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/gcc-171204094537378.html>, Accessed on 16.08.2019.
- Al-Rahma, A. (2015). *Leadership in the Middle East and Security: (Sultanate of Oman)*. Security Seminars, Muscat.
- Army Technology (2019). *The World's Biggest Arms Importing Countries in 2018*.
<https://www.army-technology.com/features/largest-importer-of-arms/>, Accessed on 01.06.2019.
- Baabood, A. (2014). *Gulf Countries and Arab Transitions: Role, Support and Effects*. Barcelona: IEMed.
- Bakeer, A. (2020). Interview by Author. Ankara, April 17, 2020

- Cafiero, G. & Karasik T. (2016). *Can Oman's Stability Outlive Sultan Qaboos?*. Washington: Middle East Institute.
- CRS. (2016). *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*. Washington Congressional Research Service.
- CRS. (2019). *Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*. Washington Congressional Research Service.
- Çetinoğlu, N. (2010). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) after U.S. led Invasion of Iraq: Toward a Security Community? *Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika*, 6(24), 91-114.
- Dazi-Heni, F. (2017). *Oman: National Challenges and Regional Issues in The Post-Sultan Era*. Paris: Irsem.
- Elashmawy, S. (2014). The Foreign Policies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar Towards the Arab Springs: The Cases of Egypt, Libya and Bahrain. *Challenges of Political Transition in the Middle East: Internal and External Factors*. ECPR, Innsbruck.
- Fuller, G. (2014). *Qatar's "Maverick" Foreign Policies*. Graham Fuller.
<http://grahamefuller.com/qatars-maverick-foreign-policy/> Accessed on 05.06.2019.
- Ibish, H. (2017). *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*. Washington: The Arab Gulf States Institute.
- IPI (2013). *Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East: Options and Challenges*. New York: IPI.
- Jones, J. (2014). *Oman's Quiet Diplomacy*. Oslo: NUPI.
- Kabalan, M. (2018). Why Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy is Failing.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/saudi-arabia-foreign-policy-failing-181120113409460.html>, Accessed on 09.06.2019.
- Kamrava, M. (2012). The Arab Spring and the Saudi-led Counterrevolution. *Orbis*, 56(1), 96-104.
- Karen, E. Y. (2016). *The Interventionist Turn in Gulf States' Foreign Policies*. Washington: The Arab Gulf States Institute.

Kinninmont, J. (2012). *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*. London: Chatham House.

Nuruzzaman, M. (2019). *Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia*.

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0259.xml>, Accessed on 07.07.2019.

Legrenzi, M. (2002). The Gulf Cooperation Council in Light of International Relations Theory. *International Area Review*, 5(2), 21-37.

Naser, M. (2017). Kuwait's Foreign Policy Towards Regional Issues in the Middle East from 2003 to 2014. *Asian Social Science*, 13(11), 95-108.

Salisbury, P. (2018). *Aiding and Abetting? The GCC States, Foreign Assistance, and Shifting Approaches to Stability*. Houston; James A. Baker III Institute.

Slijper, F. (2017). *The United Arab Emirates, Arms Transfers and Regional Conflict*. Utrecht: PAX.

Szalai, M. (2017). The Alliance Dilemma of The Gulf States After The Obama Presidency. *Cojourn*, 2(2-3), 1-18.

Toumi, A. (2020). Interview by Author. Ankara, May 12, 2020.

Ulrichsen, K. C. (2013). Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences. *International Journal of Security & Development*, 2(1), 1-12.

Valeri, M. (2014). *Oman's Mediatory Efforts in Regional Crises*. Oslo: NOREF.

Wright, S. (2011). Foreign Policy in the GCC States. in M. Kamrava (Ed.), *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 72-93.

Yusuf, K. (2020). Interview by Author. Doha, May 25, 2020.

Yazarın Katkı Oranı

Makale tek yazarlıdır.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı: Çalışma için destek alınmamıştır.