

THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF SAUDI ARABIA AND QATAR TOWARDS THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The Cases of Egypt, Libya and Bahrain

5th ECPR Graduate Student Conference, University of Innsbruck

Section 02: Area Studies – The MENA Region

Panel P007: Challenges of Political Transition in the Middle East: Internal and External Factors
and Actors

(Note: This paper will also be presented at the Gulf Research Meeting in August 2014 at the
University of Cambridge)

[Draft paper, please do not cite]

Sherif ELASHMAWY

Sciences Po Paris

sherifelashmawy@hotmail.com

Abstract

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both responsible for the proactive regional diplomacy of the GCC in the context of the “Arab Spring”. While both States have primarily sought to keep the revolutions away from the Gulf and ensure their own regime survival, Doha and Riyadh have been extensively diplomatically (but also militarily) involved in the Arab uprisings and the post-revolutionary transitions. The Arab uprisings have had a significant impact on the foreign and security policies of both Gulf countries. While Qatar portrayed itself as the proponent of the revolutions, Saudi Arabia has been widely perceived as a counter-revolutionary power. However, Saudi and Qatari reactions to the Arab uprisings proved to be more complex than just being proponent or opponent of the uprisings. These reactions suggested a transformation in the role conceptions of both countries, Saudi Arabia moving from being a conservative and pro-regional-status quo power to more of a regional leader, and Qatar shifting its foreign policy from the status of a “mediator” to a more interventionist role.

Keywords: Middle East, Arab Spring, foreign policy, role theory.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in the winter of 2010-2011, the region has witnessed an unprecedented activity from the Arab Gulf States that went far beyond the boundaries of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). While the Gulf States, minus Qatar, have been often regarded as agents of counterrevolution in the region, and even compared to the European monarchies of the Holy Alliance in 1815¹, the GCC's reaction to the Arab uprisings is far more complex than just being described as "counterrevolutionary". While their ultimate goal was to ensure their regime survival and domestic stability, the Gulf monarchies pursued different strategies elsewhere in the region in an attempt to shape the evolving post-2011 regional order.

This paper looks at how the two most active members of the GCC, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar, reacted to the Arab uprisings, focusing on three cases of these uprisings: Egypt, Libya and Bahrain. Our theoretical lens to investigate the foreign policies of the two Gulf States in the context of the Arab uprisings is the theory of "national role conception", which according to Khalevi Holsti "includes the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state and of the functions, if any, their state should perform in the international system or in subordinate regional systems."² In short, it is the image that the State projects for itself towards its external environment. In this context, we will look at how the reactions of both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, guided by a calculation of threats and opportunities posed and presented by the Arab uprisings, influenced their own national role conceptions and led to an evolution of the latter.

I. The Arab uprisings as threat

A. Egypt's revolution: a multidimensional threat to Saudi Arabia

After the downfall of the Tunisian president Ben Ali and the rise of protests in Egypt against Mubarak leading to his ouster, Riyadh feared domino effect in the region. As the Kingdom was already facing a troubled environment (in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq,...etc.), the Arab

¹ Cf. F. Gregory Gause III, "Is Saudi Arabia really counter-revolutionary?", *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2011, accessible online at http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/09/is_saudi_arabia_really_counter_revolutionary , accessed 15/5/2014.

² K. J. Holsti, "National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 1970, pp. 245-246.

uprisings added new uncertainties as they overthrew Riyadh's allies in the region. As the success of both Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions surprised Saudi Arabia, the latter's reaction was in line with its own national role conception, that is maintaining stability and status quo in its environment. In that context, Saudi Arabia's first response to Egypt's uprising came as early as on January 29, when King Abdullah phoned President Mubarak to express his support in face of the mass protests.³ On the same day, the Saudi King phoned US president Barack Obama, told him "not to humiliate Mubarak" and warned that he would bankroll Egypt if the US decide to withdraw its annual aid programme.⁴ The Saudi official support for Mubarak lasted until the day before the latter's ouster, when the Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal denounced what he described as a "foreign interference in Egypt affairs".⁵ In its position towards Egypt's revolution, Saudi Arabia had two main concerns: the survival of its own regime and its domestic stability on the one hand, and the maintenance of its position in the region on the other hand.

The challenge of a potential contagion

After the downfall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the question that preoccupied experts and politicians was the following: who will be next? Regarding the possibility of the eruption of popular protests in Saudi Arabia, some commentators expected that Saudi is "ripe for revolution" based on similarities in political, socio-economic, and demographic conditions with the countries that experienced uprisings⁶ and the fact that the Kingdom experienced a pro-democracy movement since the Iraq war in 2003.⁷ On the other hand, other commentators argued that the

³ "Tadamun 'arabi rasmi ma'a Mubarak" [Official Arab solidarity with Mubarak], *Al Jazeera*, 29 January 2011, accessible online at <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/e827994b-8ef0-4237-bf5c-b34623734a0e>, accessed 1/4/2014.

⁴ "Saudis told Obama not to humiliate Mubarak", *The Times*, 10 February 2011, accessible online at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article2905628.ece>, accessed 1/4/2014.

⁵ "Al-amir Saoud al-Faisal : ma taf' alohou ba'd al-dowal iza' misr tadakhul safir fi sha'niha al-dakhili" [Prince Saoud al-Faisal : What some States do with regard to Egypt is a flagrant interference in its internal affairs], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 11 February 2011, accessible online at <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11763&article=607781>, accessed 1/4/2014.

⁶ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Yes, It Could Happen Here: Why Saudi Arabia is ripe for revolution", *Foreign Policy*, 28 February 2011, accessible online at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/28/yes_it_could_happen_here?page=full, accessed 3/4/2014

⁷ Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the potential for protest", *Foreign Policy*, 2 June 2011, accessible online at http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/02/saudi_islamists_and_the_potential_for_protest, accessed 2/4/2014. See also Yasmine Farouk, *Autonomisation, accommodation et "wait to seize": les stratégies réactives du triangle arabe après l'intervention américaine en Irak : l'Arabie Saoudite, l'Égypte et la Syrie (2003-2007)*, Doctoral thesis, Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Paris, 2010, 388p.

Kingdom was immune from mass protests in light of the high living standards of Saudi citizens and the positive governmental performance in the past decade.⁸

What happened in reality was something between the two projected scenarios. The Kingdom experienced some forms of protests, but not as wide as some had expected. Beside the Shia-majority protests in the Eastern province, Sunni circles also mobilised. On the 10th of February 2011, “Islamic Umma party” (*Hizb al-Umma al-Islami*) was created by 10 activists, intellectuals and businessmen demanding political reform and a greater representation.⁹ As the first political party in the Kingdom (yet officially unrecognised), the move signaled the first echo of the “Arab Spring” inside Saudi Arabia. On February 23, three petitions circulated among Saudi Sunni Islamist and liberal figures demanding political reforms in the Kingdom.¹⁰ Simultaneously, a call for a Saudi “day of rage” circulated on the Internet (although never materialised).¹¹

While the Saudi regime reacted to the domestic demands by mobilising its financial, spiritual and repressive resources, it understood the significance of the challenge the success of Egypt’s revolt could exert, and thus sought to limit any revolutionary change in post-Mubarak Egypt. In this context, Riyadh feared the rise to power in Cairo of a pro-democracy revolutionary elite that is likely to be hostile to conservative and authoritarian Saudi rule, or the rise of the Muslim brotherhood that promotes a more democratic, republican and activist version of political Islam, challenging the Saudi Wahhabi model on its own grounds.

In the first scenario, it is noteworthy that since the June 1967 war, Saudi Arabia has invested billions of dollars to neutralise Egypt. During the 1950s and 1960s, a period known as

⁸ Nawaf Obaid, “There will be no uprising in Saudi Arabia”, *Foreign Policy*, 10 March 2011, accessible online at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/10/there_will_be_no_uprising_in_saudi_arabia?page=full, accessed 3/4/2014.

⁹ “Pro-reform Saudi activists launch political party”, *Reuters*, 10 February 2011, accessible online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/10/us-saudi-opposition-idUSTRE71942L20110210?sp=true>, accessed 4/4/2014. A week later, most of the party’s founding members got arrested by the Saudi authorities. Cf. “Saudi Arabia : Free Political Activists”, *Human Rights Watch*, accessible online at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/19/saudi-arabia-free-political-activists>, accessed 4/4/2014

¹⁰ Stéphane Lacroix, “L’Arabie Saoudite au défi du Printemps Arabe”, *Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, (CERI) - Sciences Po*, September 2011, accessible online at http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/archive/2011/septembre/dossier/art_sl.pdf, accessed 4/4/2014.

¹¹ “Saudi Arabia ‘day of Rage’ protest fizzles”, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 2011, accessible online at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/mar/12/world/la-fg-saudi-unrest-20110312>, accessed 4/4/2014.

the Arab cold war¹², Egypt supported the “movement of Free princes”, inspired by Nasser’s pan-Arabism, that rebelled against the Saudi rule. At the same time, and since 1962, Egypt engaged in a proxy-war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen through its support for the Yemeni republicans and the deployment of 70.000 Egyptian soldiers on the Yemeni territory.¹³ After the 1967 war and the death of Nasser in 1970, Egypt no longer represented a challenge to Saudi Arabia, as the latter started to bankroll post-war bankrupted Egypt with King Faisal’s aid programme to Egypt, Syria and Jordan.¹⁴ With the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution in January 2011, Saudi Arabia feared the emergence of a new democratic and regionally ambitious Egypt, or at least an Egyptian government that is responsive to the revolutionary street demands posing a threat to Riyadh, as it did during the Nasser’s era.

In the second scenario, the potential influence of the rise of Egypt’s Islamists on the Saudi society represented a challenge to Riyadh. During the 1950s, Saudi Arabia served as a refuge for thousands of Egyptian and Syrian Muslim brotherhood militants who fled persecution in their countries. The Brothers first cooperated with King Faisal in his cold war with Egypt’s Nasser, playing a key role in the Saudi society with the creation of the Islamic University of Medina, intended to counterweight Egypt’s Al-Azhar, and the World Islamic League (*Rabitat al-‘alam al-islami*) in 1962.¹⁵ Progressively, the Brothers become more active in the Saudi Society in the 1970s and ultimately become at the origin of Saudi’s *Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Awakening) movement, which mixes in its ideology between traditional Wahhabism and the Brotherhood’s ideology.¹⁶ With the eruption of the Gulf war in 1991, the relationship between Al Saud and the Muslim brothers deteriorated in light of the latter’s opposition to the international intervention against Saddam, and the Saudis started to look at the Muslim brotherhood with suspicion, especially with the political mobilisation of the *Sahwa* inside the Kingdom throughout the 1990s.

¹² Cf. Malcom Kerr, *The Arab cold war: Gamal ‘Abd Al-Nasir and his rivals*, New York: Oxford University Press, Novembre 1999 (1st edition in August 1971).

¹³ Bob Dreyfuss, “Saudi Arabia’s fear of Egypt”, *The Nation*, 13 February 2011, accessible online at <http://www.thenation.com/blog/158523/saudi-arabias-fear-egypt>, accessed 6/4/2014.

¹⁴ “Al-qisa al-tarikhiya lil musa’adat al ‘arabiya” [The history of the Arab aids], *Al Ahram*, 13 February 2012, accessible online at <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/articles.aspx?Serial=800403&eid=104>, accessed 6/4/2014.

¹⁵ Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens : une insurrection manquée*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, February 2010, pp.48-52.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 65-66.

Therefore, the outbreak of the Arab uprisings resulted in a Saudi fear of a potential mobilisation of *al-Sahwa* that is, according to Stéphane Lacroix, the major and most organised political group in Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ This regime-perceived threat materialised with the signature of many petitions in early 2011 by *al-Sahwa* leading clerics calling for political reforms. The threat became even closer with the accession to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (and in Tunisia), which Riyadh considered as a challenge to its own stability and decided to massively and rapidly support the August 2013 Egyptian military's ouster of the Islamist Mohamed Morsi from power, a support that *al-Sahwa* leaders denounced.¹⁸

Regional balance challenges

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its consequences, analysts and politicians started talking about an emerging “new Middle East”.¹⁹ The debated new regional order was characterized by a declining U.S. influence and leverage, a rise in the influence of regional powers outside the “Arab system” (especially Turkey and Iran), and an increasing influence of non-state actors in regional politics (such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and entrepreneurs of violence).

In fact, the post-2003 regional order dynamics in the Middle East were clearly manifested in Israel's wars with Hezbollah in 2006 and with Hamas in 2008-2009. These wars witnessed important moments of rivalry between two regional camps: the “moderates” (*al-i'tidal*) comprising Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority on the one hand; and the “hardliners” or the “resistance camp” (*al mumana'a/ al muqawamah*) comprising Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas on the other hand. The rivalry between the two camps was around key regional files such as Palestine and the U.S. role in the region. In this context, Egypt and Saudi Arabia shared a common view of Islamist non-state actors in the region as being dangerous to stability, accusing Hezbollah in 2006 of “dragging the whole region to adventures”,²⁰ and publicly supporting the UN Security Council resolution 1559 on the disarmament of Hezbollah in

¹⁷ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Islamists and the potential for protest”, *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. Marc Lynch, “Gulf Islamist dissent over Egypt”, *Foreign Policy*, 18 August 2013, accessible online at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/18/gulf_islamist_dissent_over_egypt, accessed 18/05/2014.

¹⁹ See for example : Condoleeza Rice, *Special Briefing on travel to the Middle East and Europe*, 21 July 2006 ; Richard N. Haass, “The New Middle East”, *Foreign Affairs*, 85, 2006, pp. 2-12.

²⁰ Morten Valbjorn & André Bank, “The 2006 Lebanon war and the Sunni-Shi'i divide”, *Middle East Report*, 242, spring 2007.

Lebanon.²¹ Also, during the Gaza war in December 2008-January 2009, Egypt and Saudi Arabia boycotted the emergency Arab summit in Doha on 16 January, to which the Iranian President Ahmadinejad and the Hamas leader Khalid Mashaal were invited.²²

In the polarisation between “moderates” and “hardliners”, that some called the “new Arab cold war”²³, that dominated the Middle East in the first decade of the 21st century, Saudi Arabia and Egypt shared the same visions for the desired regional order and concerns about the potential threats to their interests. Thus, the fall of Mubarak in February 2011 represented a strategic loss for Saudi Arabia and a destabilisation to the existing balance of power between the two aforementioned rival camps. In the aftermath of Mubarak’s fall, and as Egypt was living a euphoric moment and great expectations of change that the ruling SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces) tried to cope with, Egypt gave signs that it might be shifting its foreign policy in a way that would be undesirable for Riyadh.

The first sign of foreign policy shift was the host of a Hamas delegation by Egypt’s then-foreign minister Nabil al-Arabi in March 2011 to discuss Palestinian reconciliation with Fatah. On 4 May 2011, Egypt concluded an accord of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, reopened the Rafah border crossing point, mostly closed under Mubarak’s last years in power. Commenting on the reconciliation deal between the Palestinian factions brokered by Egypt, the ministry of foreign affairs’ spokeswoman Menha Bakhoum said: “Egypt is resuming its role that was once abdicated.”²⁴ On another front, Egypt started warming up to Iran. Signs of a rapprochement between Cairo and Tehran began as early as on 22 February 2011, eleven days after Mubarak’s resignation and for the first time since 1979, when Egypt allowed two Iranian warships to cross the Suez Canal on their way to Syria for a training exercise.²⁵ This gesture was followed by official and popular visits between the two countries, which raised GCC countries’

²¹ Amr Hamzawy, “Adventurism versus submission”, *Al Ahram Weekly*, 27 July 2006, No. 805.

²² “Gaza split prompts Arab countries to boycott emergency summit”, *The Guardian*, 15 January 2009, accessible online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/15/gaza-egypt-saudi-qatar-summit>, accessed 24/5/2014 ; Y. Yehoshua, “The Doha Summit: A defeat for the Saudi-Egyptian camp”, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* (Middle East Media Research institute), Report No. 510, 8 April 2009.

²³ Morten Valbjorn and André Bank, “The New Arab cold war: rediscovering the Arab dimension of Middle East regional politics”, *Review of International Studies*, 2011.

²⁴ “In shift, Egypt warms to Iran and Hamas, Israel’s foes”, *The New York Times*, 28 April 2011, accessible online at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/world/middleeast/29egypt.html?_r=3&, accessed 25/5/2014.

²⁵ Dina Esfandiary, “Iran and Egypt: a complicated tango?”, *Opinion* (European Union Institute for Security Studies), 18 October 2012, accessible online at <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/iran-and-egypt-a-complicated-tango/>, accessed 10/05/2014.

concerns about Egypt's new foreign policy orientations.²⁶ In the same vein, Saudi Arabia, among other GCC states, offered Egypt 4 billion dollars in aids interpreted as an attempt to prevent Egypt from becoming too close to Iran.²⁷

With the election of Mohamed Morsi as President of Egypt in June 2012, the new president's foreign policy also proved to be problematic to Saudi Arabia. While Morsi's first overseas trip as President was to the Kingdom of Saudi, divergences dominated the relationship between the two countries in the following months. Two major trends in Morsi's foreign policy raised Riyadh's concerns: Cairo's regional alliances, and the diversification of Egypt's foreign policy. These two trends, along with the challenge Egypt's Muslim brotherhood posed to Saudi's domestic front, pushed Riyadh to back Morsi's ouster from power in July 2013.

The first trend in Morsi's foreign policy was to distance himself from Mubarak by engaging in a privileged relationship with Qatar, the Brotherhood's major supporter and Saudi Arabia's rival, and politically allying with Turkey's ruling AKP. These alliances increased the potentiality of an emerging regional order shaped by "Islamist democrats" in which Riyadh would find itself isolated. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia was suspicious about Morsi's relationship with Iran, after the latter's visit to Tehran in August 2012 (which marked the first visit by an Egyptian President to Iran since 1979) and his proposed "Syria regional contact group" composed of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Morsi's inclusion of Iran in the resolution efforts of the Syrian crisis angered Riyadh, which boycotted the group's meeting in Cairo on 17 September 2012.²⁸

The second marking trend in the foreign policy of Egypt under Morsi was the effort to diversify Egypt's foreign relations. In this respect, Morsi's overseas visits to all the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), Pakistan, Iran, Ethiopia and Sudan suggest that Egypt was looking for new foreign partners in order to reduce its dependence on

²⁶ According to a report by the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Qabas*, high-level GCC officials expressed their concerns that a potential Egypt-Iran rapprochement would be at the expense of Arab Gulf countries and their security. Cf. "Al-khaliji ablgha al-Qahira: tawkit al-takarob ma'a Iran yothish al-qalaq" [The GCC told Cairo: The timing of a rapprochement with Iran raises concerns], *Al-Qabas*, No. 13614, 24 April 2011.

²⁷ "Arab states' aid to Egypt seen as effort to block Iran influence", *Bloomberg*, 5 July 2011, accessible online at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-07-05/arab-states-aid-to-egypt-seen-as-effort-to-block-iran-influence.html>, accessed 7/4/2014.

²⁸ "Saudi Arabia stays out of regional talks on Syria", *Reuters*, 17 September 2012, accessible online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/17/us-syria-crisis-egypt-idUSBRE88G13N20120917>, accessed 10/4/2014.

traditional allies, including the U.S. and Gulf countries. Egypt's foreign policy orientations under Morsi exhibited an appetite for regional leadership and search for new partners, which met with a Saudi dissatisfaction.

B. Bahrain's uprising and the convergence of Saudi and Qatari interests

If Saudi Arabia's policy towards Egypt since 2011 aimed at avoiding a possible domino effect, Saudi fears materialised three days after Mubarak's ouster when revolution arrived in the Gulf, precisely in Bahrain since 14 February 2011. As a result, Saudi Arabia found itself more threatened and thus intended to take concrete actions in order to protect its own regime and its position in the region. Qatar, unlike its pro-revolutionary engagements elsewhere in the region, has joined the rest of the GCC in supporting the Al Khalifa dynasty in the face of popular contestation.

A GCC common reaction

In reaction to the mounting street protests in Bahrain, the GCC adopted a common counterrevolutionary strategy based on two aspects: a financial and economic support on the one hand, and a direct military intervention on the other hand.

Three days after the start of the protests, the GCC foreign ministers convened in Manama to express their support and solidarity with the Bahraini government.²⁹ On 10 March 2011, a Gulf "Marshall Plan" worth of 20 billion dollars was initiated at the Ministerial meeting held in Riyadh to assist the Council's least rich members who face considerable street protests, namely Bahrain and Oman.³⁰

In parallel with the aid programme and the political support, the GCC took a further step to eliminate the threat arising from the Bahraini archipelago. On 13 March 2011, the Bahraini monarch Hamad Ben Issa Al Khalifa demanded the support of the GCC "Peninsula Shield

²⁹ Report of the Saudi Press Agency, 17 February 2011, accessible online at <http://www.spa.gov.sa/readsinglenews.php?id=865558>, accessed 13/4/2014.

³⁰ "Bayan sadir 'an al-dawra al-thamina ba'da al mi'a lil majlis al-wizari" [Statement of the 118th session of the ministerial council], accessible online at: <http://www.gcc-sg.org/indexb18f.html?action=Sec-Show&ID=316>, accessed 13/4/2014.

Forces”.³¹ On the following day, about 1200 Saudi soldiers and 800 Emirati policemen, under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Forces, entered Manama through the King Fahd Causeway connecting Saudi Arabia to Bahrain to help the government restore public order.³² According to Bernard Haykel, there was a consensus among the GCC states that “no popular uprising in the Gulf can be allowed to succeed” and that “no concessions will be made because of public protests.”³³

Beyond the threat Bahraini uprising posed to the domestic front of the other GCC states, the regional dimension was as well at play since the Gulf monarchies perceived any success of the Bahraini uprising as by definition a success for Iran, bearing in mind that the majority of Bahrain’s population are Shiites. At the GCC ministerial meeting in Riyadh in March 2011, the Council issued a statement expressing its suspicion over an Iranian support for the Bahraini opposition. The statement read: “The Ministerial Council (Foreign Ministers) of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) today confirmed that its countries and peoples categorically reject any foreign attempt to intervene in their internal affairs, announcing that it would instead face with firmness and decisiveness whoever try to tamper with their security and interests or spread the seeds of rift and sedition among their peoples.”³⁴ Furthermore, the deployment of GCC troops in Bahrain met with Iranian critics, as the spokesman of the Iranian foreign ministry said: “The presence of foreign troops and meddling into Bahrain’s internal affairs will only further complicate the issue”.³⁵

Unpacking the Saudi response to Bahrain’s uprising: the convergence of threats

In contrast with its counterrevolutionary stance towards other revolutions in the region, the Saudi response to the Bahraini uprising was more intense, direct and multidimensional

³¹ Karen Leigh, “Bahrain: Caught between Saudi Arabia and Iran, *Time Magazine*, 15 March 2011, accessible online at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2058992,00.html>, accessed le 13/4/2014.

³² “Saudi troops enter Bahrain to help put down unrest”, *The New York Times*, 14 March 2011, accessible online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed 13/4/2014.

³³ Bernard Haykel, “Saudi Arabia and Qatar in a time of revolution”, *Gulf Analysis Paper* (Center for Strategic and International Studies), February 2013, p. 2, accessible online at <http://csis.org/publication/gulf-analysis-paper-saudi-arabia-and-qatar-time-revolution>, accessed 14/4/2014.

³⁴ Brandon Friedman, “Battle for Bahrain: What one uprising meant for the Gulf states and Iran”, *World Affairs*, March/April 2012, accessible online at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/battle-bahrain-what-one-uprising-meant-gulf-states-and-iran>, accessed le 14/4/2014

³⁵ “Iran criticizes deployment of foreign soldiers to subdue Bahrain uprisings”, *Bloomberg*, 15 March 2011, accessible online at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-14/saudi-arabia-gcc-troops-enter-bahrain-as-protests-threaten-gulf.html>, accessed 14/4/2014.

reflecting how alarmed Saudi rulers were by the Bahraini protests. On the one hand, the potential success of an uprising in Bahrain would have posed a major threat on the Saudi regime's survival. On the other hand, such success would have changed the regional balance in the Gulf to the disadvantage of Riyadh and in favour of Tehran. It is the convergence of these threats that drove the Kingdom to take the diplomatic and military actions at its disposal to avoid a downfall of the Bahraini regime.

In fact, Saudi fears of possible consequences of the Bahraini protests on its interior soon materialised, especially in the Kingdom's Shia-populous Eastern province. Since mid-February 2011, protests started to spread in the cities of the Eastern province, inspired by the protests in the neighboring Bahrain and endorsed by influential Shia clerics like Nimr al-Nimr.³⁶ After the failure of the planned "day of rage" in the Kingdom on 11 March, the Saudi regime mobilised its various resources to counter the protests both in Bahrain and within its own territory. In addition to the *fatwas* issued by the religious establishment criminalising public protests³⁷, King Abdullah announced on 23 February and 18 March 2011 public aid programmes worth of 130 billion dollars, along with the creation of tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector.³⁸ Furthermore, the country's security apparatus was heavily deployed in the Eastern province as well as in Riyadh. In its report titled "Saudi Arabia's 'day of rage': One year on" in March 2012, Amnesty International confirmed that Saudi authorities still detained six persons from the year before.³⁹

The intervention of the GCC troops, led by Saudi Arabia, in Bahrain to put an end to the Shia-led protests in the tiny Kingdom, fits well into the Saudi counterrevolutionary strategy aimed at ensuring its own internal stability and maintaining its regional position. It is noteworthy that, seen the importance of Bahrain for Saudi Arabia's internal stability, the Saudi government has always dealt with Bahrain as a domestic affair. Indicatively, the decision to send troops to Bahrain, under the auspices of the GCC, was pioneered by the minister of Interior prince Nayef

³⁶ Stéphane Lacroix, "L'Arabie Saoudite au défi du printemps arabe", *Les dossiers du CERI* (Sciences Po.), September 2011, p. 1, 2.

³⁷ "Saudi Arabia bans public protests", *The Guardian*, 6 March 2011, accessible online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/06/saudi-arabia-bans-public-protest>, accessed 5/4/2014.

³⁸ Stéphane Lacroix, op. cit.

³⁹ "Saudi Arabia's 'day of rage': One year on", *Amnesty International*, 2012, accessible online at <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/MDE23/007/2012/en/c648b1a6-2c8e-4fc7-a1e1-24c5f5cf5d47/mde230072012en.pdf>, accessed 17/4/2014.

Ben Abdelaziz, and not by the Foreign Affairs or Defense ministers.⁴⁰ Through its intervention in Bahrain, the Saudi regime sent a message to its own population, especially in the East, that it would take all measures, including repression, to protect itself and counter the protests.⁴¹

Bahrain has also been historically a hot spot of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, seen its geographic position and social fabric. In the Saudi mindset, a potential democratisation of Bahrain will necessarily result in the emergence of a Shiite government, which means an Iran-proxy in Saudi's perception. Therefore, the Saudis feared that Iran would use a Shiite-led Bahrain as a strategic point from which it spreads its influence in the Gulf and beyond, as it does from Southern Lebanon and post-2003 Iraq.⁴²

A Bahraini exception in Qatar's foreign policy?

Despite the Qatari support for the 2011 Arab uprisings, Bahrain's uprising seemed to be the exception. In reality, it is not clear whether Qatar concretely took part in the GCC troops' intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 or not, however it publicly endorsed the move.⁴³ In parallel, Qatar joined Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait in their 20 billion dollars aids pledge to Bahrain and Oman. Furthermore, Qatar's credibility got affected by Aljazeera's coverage of the Bahraini protests. On 14 March, one day after the deployment of the GCC troops, Prime Minister Hamad Ben Jassim Al Khalifa held a phone interview with Aljazeera and called the deployment of the GCC troops an "assistance and support within the framework of existing agreements".⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jane Kinninmont, "Keep it in the family", *Foreign Policy*, 3 November 2011, accessible online at http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/03/keeping_it_in_the_family_for_saudi_succession, accessed 17/4/2014.

⁴¹ John R. Bradley, "Saudi Arabia's invisible hand in the Arab Spring: How the Kingdom is wielding influence across the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 October 2011, accessible online at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136473/john-r-bradley/saudi-arabias-invisible-hand-in-the-arab-spring>, accessed 17/4/2014.

⁴² Bernard Haykel, op. cit, p. 4.

⁴³ Some sources confirm that Qatari troops participated in the GCC operation in Bahrain. Cf. "Qatar has sent troops to Bahrain", *Ahram Online*, 18 March 2011, accessible online at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/7988/World/Region/Qatar-has-sent-troops-to-Bahrain.aspx>, accessed 18/4/2014. On the contrary, scholars such as Lina Khatib and Kristian Ulrichsen point out that Qatar did not send any troops to Bahrain: Cf. Lina Khatib, "Qatar's foreign policy : the limits of pragmatism", *International Affairs*, 89 : 2, 2013, p.419 ; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Small states with a big role : Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the wake of the Arab Spring", *HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series*, n°3, October 2012, p. 14

⁴⁴ "Qatar: Al Jazeera faces tough questions as Doha backs Saudi troops in Bahrain", *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 2011, accessible online at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/03/qatar-bahrain-saudi-arabia-protests-troops-security.html>, accessed 19/4/2014.

As a result of Qatar's solidarity with the Bahraini regime, Doha has been accused of double standards in its policy towards the Arab uprisings, having openly supported revolutions outside the GCC and opposed those inside.⁴⁵ In this respect, Qatar's position vis-à-vis the Bahraini uprising seemed contradictory to the image it projected for itself throughout the past decade as champion of liberties in the Arab world and voice of the oppressed and downtrodden citizens throughout the region.⁴⁶

In fact, the Qatari-owned Aljazeera channel largely ignored in its coverage events in Bahrain in favour of the Libyan revolution that was happening simultaneously. Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights criticized Aljazeera coverage of the Bahraini uprising, accusing the channel of double standards.⁴⁷ Bearing in mind that Aljazeera gained its popularity in the Arab world for transmitting the "voice of the people", Rajab's remark reflects the crisis of credibility the channel suffered from with its biased coverage of the Arab uprisings. It is however noteworthy that Aljazeera English's coverage of the 2011 events in Bahrain was more comprehensive. A fifty-minute documentary called "Shouting in the Dark" about Bahraini uprising was aired on Aljazeera English (but never on Aljazeera Arabic) in August 2011.⁴⁸

II. The Arab uprisings as opportunity

A. Qatar's pro-revolutionary stance on Egypt

Among the Gulf States, Qatar was the best placed to benefit from the 2011 Arab uprisings. Qatar's national role conception it managed to develop since 1995 as a mediator and "voice of Arab streets" (through its popular channel Aljazeera), its previous engagements in the region and its huge financial resources allowed it to wield influence across the region in light of the Arab uprisings. The Egyptian case is particularly relevant in this respect.

⁴⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Small states with a big role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the wake of the Arab Spring", op. cit., p. 14.

⁴⁶ Lina Khatib, "Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism", op. cit., p. 428.

⁴⁷ "Bahrain arrests human rights activist Nabeel Rajab", *Eurasia Review*, 6 May 2012, accessible online at <http://www.eurasiareview.com/06052012-bahrain-arrests-human-rights-activist-nabeel-rajab/>, accessed 15/5/2014.

⁴⁸ Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that wasn't*, Stanford: Stanford Briefs, 2013, p. 140. The documentary is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaTKDMYOB0U>

Understanding Qatar's Egypt stance

In contrast to Saudi Arabia for which the outbreak of a popular uprising in the most populous Arab country represented a major threat, Qatar did not perceive Egypt's revolution as a threat, but rather as an opportunity. That absence of risks for Qatar with respect to Egypt's uprising is explained by two major factors: an uncontested social contract at home and the state of Egypt-Qatar relations before 2011. The combination of these factors forms what Shadi Hamid called the "Qatari exceptionalism" in the context of the Arab uprisings.⁴⁹

On the domestic front, Qatar has been one of the least affected Arab countries by the wave of uprisings that swept across the region in 2011. Many arguments explain why Qataris abstained from protesting against their government. The argument that is most advanced by experts in this context is that Qataris are too rich to protest.⁵⁰ According to the CIA Factbook, Qatar has the highest GDP per capita in the world, around 102.000 dollars per year.⁵¹ Among Qatar's population of 1.9 million, only 300.000 are citizens benefiting from zero taxation, free public services and an unemployment rate of 0.3%.⁵² Furthermore, and in contrast with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar has never had tensions with the Muslim brotherhood movement who, on their turn, never undermined the Qatari regime's legitimacy.⁵³ Besides, Qatar's Shiite minority (between 5% and 15% of the population) is well integrated in the Qatari society and bureaucracy.⁵⁴ Thus, the risk of a potential mobilisation of the Shiite community against the political regime, which heavily played out in Saudi Arabia's reaction to the "Arab Spring", was almost inexistent in the case of Qatar. In short, Qatar did not risk any internal instability as a

⁴⁹ Shadi Hamid, "There aren't protests in Qatar – so why did the Emir just announce elections?" *The Atlantic*, 1 November 2011, accessible online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/there-arent-protests-in-qatar-so-why-did-the-emir-just-announce-elections/247661/>, accessed 25/4/2014.

⁵⁰ David Roberts, "Qatar: domestic quietism, elite adventurism", in Fatima Ayub (ed.), "What does the Gulf think about the Arab Awakening?", *Gulf Analysis* (European Council on Foreign Relations), 10 April 2013, accessible online at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/what_does_the_gulf_think_about_the_arab_awakening203, accessed 25/4/2014.

⁵¹ Country comparison: GDP Per Capita (PPP)", *CIA World Factbook*, accessible online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html>.

2013 numbers: "Qatar", *CIA World Factbook*, accessible online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/qa.html>.

⁵² "Qatar", *CIA World Factbook*, accessible online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/qa.html>.

⁵³ Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar in a time of revolution", op. cit., p. 2.

⁵⁴ Ahmed K. Majidyar, "Is sectarian balance in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar at risk?", *American Enterprise Institute*, 21 October 2013, accessible online at <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/is-sectarian-balance-in-the-united-arab-emirates-oman-and-qatar-at-risk/>, accessed 27/4/2014.

result of its support for the Egyptian revolution, which provided Qatar with an important flexibility in its foreign policy. Such flexibility Saudi Arabia missed out.

On the Qatari-Egyptian relations level, Qatar's tensions with Mubarak's Egypt - except for the last few months before January 2011 which witnessed an appeasement between the two countries that culminated in Mubarak's visit to Doha in November 2010⁵⁵ - gave Doha credibility in its support for the January revolution. Qatar's lack of historical engagements in the Middle East and the relative newness of its ambitious foreign policy allowed it to maintain the image of an actor "honest broker", to use Mehran Kamrava's words.⁵⁶ The source of Qatar's disagreements with Mubarak date back to 1995, when Sheikh Hamad Ben Khalifa Al Thani deposed his own father and acceded to the throne, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt were displeased with Hamad's "palace coup" and supported other members of the Al Thani family to regain power.⁵⁷ Thereafter, relations further deteriorated mainly because of Al Jazeera channel's coverage of Egypt as well as Qatar's regional diplomacy which, according to the Egyptians, aimed at undermining Egypt's historical role in the region. In the 2000s, Qatar's diplomatic proximity to Syria and Iran and its support on various occasions for Hezbollah and Hamas, positioned Qatar in opposition to the "moderates' camp" which comprised Egypt. The latter's dissatisfaction with Doha's actions reached its peak in 2009 when Egypt (along with Saudi Arabia) opposed the organisation of an extraordinary Arab summit in Doha in the midst of Gaza war on 16 January, and when President Mubarak refused to attend the annual Arab summit held in Doha in March 2009.⁵⁸

Gaining a foothold in the new Egypt

Aljazeera's coverage of the Egyptian revolution was a key tool for Qatar to gain a foothold in post-Mubarak Egypt. According to Khaled Hroub, the rise of Al Jazeera is historically simultaneous to the mount of Qatar's external activity. It is as a result of Al Jazeera's

⁵⁵ "Jawla khalijiya lil ra'is Mubarak tashmal al-Imarat wa al-Bahrain wa Qatar » [A Gulf tour of President Mubarak includes the Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar], *Al-Riyadh*, 23 November 2010, accessible online at <http://www.alriyadh.com/578977>, accessed 27/4/2014.

⁵⁶ Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari foreign policy", *Middle East Journal*, Volume 65, No. 4, Autumn 2011, p. 543.

⁵⁷ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Saudi-Qatari tensions divide GCC", *Al-Monitor*, 6 March 2014, accessible online at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/saudi-qatar-gcc-tensions-islamist.html>, accessed 27/4/2014 ; Abdel Latif El-Menawy, « Maza turid Qatar ? (1) » [What does Qatar want? (1)], *Almasry Alyoum*, 4 September 2013, accessible online at <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/199962>, accessed 27/4/2014.

⁵⁸ "Qatar: Egypt gives Qatar the cold shoulder", *Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 2009, accessible online at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/03/egypt-1.html>, accessed 29/4/2014.

impact on public opinions across the Arab world that Qatar became capable of getting around its geopolitical weaknesses and quest for a greater role in regional, and even global, politics.⁵⁹ Despite the mass usage of social media and Internet in the Arab uprising, Jon Alterman points out that what was more striking is the decisive role television has played in the unfolding of events the expansion of protests.⁶⁰

While Al Jazeera did not call the anti-Ben Ali protests in Tunisia a “revolution” until 11 January, three days before the President’s ouster, the same channel started calling Egypt’s anti-Mubarak protests a “revolution” since 28 January, three days after the start of the wave of protests⁶¹, which met with a shutdown of its bureau by the Egyptian authorities.⁶² In fact, the images broadcasted by Aljazeera were essential in the global reporting of Egypt’s uprising especially when the government decided to cut Internet and phone signals on the evening of 27 January.⁶³ “They did not cause these events, but it’s almost impossible to imagine all this happening without Aljazeera”, says Marc Lynch.⁶⁴ To confirm its foothold and expand its influence in Egypt, Al Jazeera launched its Egyptian affiliate, Al Jazeera Mubashir Misr, entirely devoted to the coverage of Egypt news.

Progressively, Al Jazeera became a propaganda tool for the Muslim brotherhood.⁶⁵ In fact, Qatar’s support for the Brotherhood is the former’s second pillar for its strategy aimed at gaining foothold in post-2011 Egypt. In an interview with *Financial Times* in December 2011, the Qatari Prime minister referred to whom he called “moderate Islamists” saying: “we shouldn’t fear them, let’s cooperate with them.”⁶⁶ The relationship between Qatar and the Muslim brotherhood is rooted in history and date back to the 1950s. In similar to the refuge of thousands

⁵⁹ Khalid Hroub, “Qatar and the Arab Spring”, *Henrich Böll Stiftung*, 3 March 2014, accessible online at <http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/qatar-and-arab-spring-conflict-intl-politics>, accessed 1/5/2014.

⁶⁰ Jon B. Alterman, “The revolution will not be tweeted”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 34:4, fall 2011, p. 103, 104.

⁶¹ *Idem*.

⁶² Lawrence Pintak, “The Al Jazeera revolution”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 February 2011, accessible online at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/02/the_al_jazeera_revolution, accessed 1/5/2014.

⁶³ Vivian Salama, “Aljazeera’s (R)evolution?”, *Jadaliyya*, 20 May 2012, accessible online at [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5610/al-jazeeras-\(r\)evolution](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5610/al-jazeeras-(r)evolution), accessed 1/5/2014.

⁶⁴ Mehdi Hasan, “Voice of the Arabspring”, *New Statesman*, 7 December 2011, accessible online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/broadcast/2011/12/arab-channel-jazeera-qatar>, accessed 3/5/2014.

⁶⁵ Bernard Haykel, *Op. cit.*, p. 8 ; Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, “Morsi’s win is Al Jazeera’s loss”, *Al-Monitor*, 1 July 2012, accessible online at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/morsys-win-is-al-jazeeras-loss.html#>, accessed 3/5/2014.

⁶⁶ “Qatari premier says the West should embrace “Arab Spring” Islamists”, *Al-Arabiya news*, 1 December 2011, accessible online at <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/01/180189.html>, accessed 3/5/2014.

of MB members in Saudi Arabia throughout the 1950s and 60s, Qatar welcomed an influx of Egyptians belonging to the MB, among which the most prominent was Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi who arrived in Qatar in the early 1960s.⁶⁷ Moreover, under the leadership of the Egyptian Abdul-Badi Saqr of the Qatar National Library, an important number of teachers belonging to the MB arrived in Qatar and ideologically influenced the Qatari education system.⁶⁸ As the MB gained influence in the Qatari society, they started organising themselves in groups carrying out philanthropic, theological, and preaching activities, without any political aspects.⁶⁹ The Brotherhood's abstention from carrying out any political activity or undermining the political regime in Doha ensured a cordial relationship between the Islamist group and the State of Qatar for decades. In 1999, the Muslim brotherhood's branch in Qatar even dissolved itself, justifying its move by the fact that "the State was carrying out its religious duties".⁷⁰

Despite the strong historical ties between both parties, it is hard to state that Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the aftermath of the revolution is ideological. In reality, the State of Qatar officially belongs to Wahhabism, since the foundation of the State by Sheikh Jassem Ben Mohammad Al Thani, and adopts the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, which makes it ideologically different from the Brotherhood thought.⁷¹ Furthermore, neither Qatar's ex-Emir, Hamad Ben Khalifa Al Thani, nor his Prime minister were ideologically influenced by the Brotherhood's thoughts. According to Shibley Telhami, the Emir identified himself as a pan-

⁶⁷ David B. Roberts, "Qatar, the Ikhwan, and transnational relations in the Gulf", *Visions of Gulf Security Workshop memos* (Project on Middle East Political Science - POMEPS), 18 March 2014, accessible online at <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/18/qatar-the-ikhwan-and-transnational-relations-in-the-gulf/>, accessed 5/5/2014.

⁶⁸ Abdulla Juma Al-Kobaisi, *The development of education in Qatar, 1950-1977: With an analysis of some educational problems*, Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 1979, pp. 122-123, accessible online at [http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1856/1/1856.pdf?EThOS%20\(BL\)](http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1856/1/1856.pdf?EThOS%20(BL)), accessed 18/4/2014.

⁶⁹ Abdul-Aziz Al Mahmoud, "Al-Ikhwan fi Qatar: Man hum?", *Al-Arab*, 8 January 2012, accessible online at <http://www.alarab.qa/details.php?issueId=1485&artid=166996>, accessed 5/5/2014.

⁷⁰ Ahmed Azem, "Qatar's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood affect entire region", *The National*, 18 May 2012, accessible online at <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/qatars-ties-with-the-muslim-brotherhood-affect-entire-region>, accessed 5/5/2014.

⁷¹ Bernard Haykel, "Qatar and Islamism", *Policy Brief* (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre), February 2013, accessible online at http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/ac81941df1be874ccbda35e747218abf.pdf, accessed 5/5/2014. See also Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, London & New York: Croom Helm, 1979.

Arab “Nasserist” and described his Prime minister as a “Sadatist” in his pragmatism and pro-western orientations.⁷²

B. The Saudi and Qatari push for regime change in Libya

In reaction to the rise in violence in Libya following the outbreak of the 17 February revolution against Qaddafi, the member states of the GCC adopted a common position. On 7 March 2011, the GCC’s Ministerial council convened in Abu Dhabi to discuss the Libyan affair, and called in its final statement for a UN action against Qaddafi.⁷³ As a result, an extraordinary Arab League ministerial meeting was held on 12 March and officially called for the imposition of a no-fly zone on Libya by the UN Security Council and for cooperation with the Libyan National Transitional Council.⁷⁴ In the preparatory phases for the NATO-led intervention against Qaddafi as well as in the operation itself, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar played a key role.

Behind the exceptional Saudi support for the Libyan revolution

In order to understand Saudi Arabia’s motivations for a regime change in Libya, in contrast with its national role conception as a guarantor for stability in the region, one must first recall the tense personal relationship between King Abdullah and the Libyan leader. Between the two Arab leaders exists a long history of personal hostility. In 2004, Saudi Arabia and the United States accused the Libyan guide of plotting to assassinate the then-crown prince Abdullah.⁷⁵ In reaction, Saudi Arabia expelled the Libyan ambassador in Riyadh and recalled its own ambassador to Tripoli.⁷⁶ Months before the uncovering of the plot, Qaddafi had accused Prince Abdullah at an Arab Summit of having “brought the Americans to occupy Iraq.”⁷⁷ In response,

⁷² Shibley Telhami, “Behind the abdication of Qatar’s emir”, *The Great Debate* (Reuters), 26 June 2013, accessible online at <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/06/26/behind-the-abdication-of-qatars-emir/>, accessed 6/5/2014. See also Florence Gaub, “Qatar : last Arab(ist) standing?”, *Issue Alert* (European Union Institute for Strategic Studies), March 2014.

⁷³ “GCC calls for UN action on Libya”, *Gulf News*, 8 March 2011, accessible online at <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/libya/gcc-calls-for-un-action-on-libya-1.773101>, accessed 8/5/2014.

⁷⁴ Resolution 7360 of the Arab League of States’ ministerial meeting, 12 March 2011.

⁷⁵ “mas’ouloun sa’oudiyoun : al-mo’amara al-libiya li’ightiyal al-amir Abdallah doberat kay tabdou ka’anaha ‘amaleya le al-Qaeda” [Saudi officials : The Libyan plot to assassinate Prince Abdallah was planned to look like an Al-Qaeda operation], *Asharq Alawsat*, 13 March 2005, accessible online at http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=287831&issueno=9602#.U3A0KvI_u2I , accessed 01/05/2014.

⁷⁶ Mark A. Heller, “The Libyan-Saudi diplomatic rupture”, *Tel Aviv Notes*, accessible online at [http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/TAUNotes120\[1\].pdf](http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/TAUNotes120[1].pdf), accessed 01/05/2014.

⁷⁷ Vijay Prashad, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*, Stirling: AK Press, 2012, p. 164.

the Saudi prince said to Qaddafi: “Your lies precede you and your grave is in front of you.”⁷⁸ In 2009 at the Doha Arab Summit, the two leaders clashed again.⁷⁹ In February 2013, the Saudi-owned daily *Alsharq Al-Awsat* published “classified documents” from the Qaddafi’s era, indicating that the Libyan colonel had planned to recruit thousands of fighters and mercenaries to penetrate the Saudi territory and carry out terrorist acts in the key Saudi cities.⁸⁰

Besides the fact that King Abdullah disliked Qaddafi and hence would not have acted to protect him, the Libyan revolution opened up many opportunities for Riyadh on three fronts: the domestic, the bilateral, and the international. On the domestic front, Saudi Arabia’s support for the Libyan popular uprising allowed it to discredit critics over its counterrevolutionary role in the region, and present itself in the eyes of its people as championing the humanitarian and humanistic cause of the Libyan Muslim people struggling against their oppressor. One must not forget the timing of the Libyan revolution and the Saudi official reaction to it, a moment characterized by many uncertainties inside the Gulf whether in Bahrain, Oman, or Saudi’s Eastern province. In such context, the Libyan revolution and the international reaction to it offered Saudi Arabia an opportunity to minimize critics that have been addressed to the Kingdom. In contrast to the Egyptian case, neither the Libyan government was Riyadh’s ally, nor is the Libyan revolution likely to influence the Saudi society on the ideological level by any means. Hence, Saudi Arabia did not risk much by supporting the Libyan revolution against Qaddafi.⁸¹

On the bilateral level, the already tense relations between Riyadh and Tripoli permitted the former to support the rebels without much embarrassment. Moreover, a regime change in Libya provided Saudi Arabia with an opportunity to develop friendly relations with Libya’s new

⁷⁸ Patrick E. Tyler, “Two said to tell of Libyan plot against Saudi”, *The New York Times*, 10 June 2004, accessible online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/10/world/two-said-to-tell-of-libyan-plot-against-saudi.html>, accessed 25/5/2014.

⁷⁹ “Muammar Gaddafi accuses Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah of lying at Arab summit”, *The Telegraph*, 30 March 2009, accessible online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/5079290/Muammar-Gaddafi-accuses-Saudi-Arabias-King-Abdullah-of-lying-at-Arab-summit.html>, accessed 09/05/2014.

⁸⁰ “Watha’eq mukhabarat al-kadhafi (1): Nizam Al-Qaddafi wada’ a khoutta li tajnid alaf al-murtazaka wa al-irhabiyin lil tasalul ‘abra al hudud al-so’udiya” [Qaddafi’s intelligence documents (1): The Qaddafi regime had planned to recruit thousands of mercenaries and terrorists to infiltrate the Saudi borders], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 18 February 2013, accessible online at http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=12501&article=717632#.U3BNw_1_u2I, accessed 9/5/2014.

⁸¹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Libya and the Gulf: Revolution and Counter-revolution”, *Hurst Publishers Blog*, 16 December 2011, accessible online at <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/libya-and-the-gulf-revolution-and-counter-revolution/>, accessed 12/04/2014.

rulers, which actually happened after Qaddafi's death. In January 2012, both countries agreed to restore diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors.⁸² Furthermore, the Chairman of the Council of Saudi Chambers Abdullah Al Mubti suggested in November 2012 the formation of a Saudi-Libyan business council⁸³, and in February 2013 the Libyan Oil and Gas Minister Abdelbari al-Aarusi during a visit to Riyadh reportedly said that Libya was willing to permit the Saudi ARAMCO to invest in Libya in the petroleum sector.⁸⁴ Despite signs of cooperation and emerging partnership between the two countries and the Libyan government's efforts to attract investments, the political and security context in Libya since 2011 prevented many of these initiatives to concretise.⁸⁵

On the international level, Saudi Arabia's support for the Libyan revolution enabled the Kingdom (along with other Gulf States), according to Kristian Ulrichsen, to establish itself as a responsible international and recover the damage in the relationship between Riyadh and Washington following their divergent views on the other uprisings in the region.⁸⁶ Robert Fisk also indicates that the US asked Saudi Arabia to provide weapons to Libyan rebels, precisely anti-tank missiles and mortars.⁸⁷

Qatar's position on Libya: a turning point in the Qatari foreign policy

After a decade in which it successfully built a worldwide reputation for mediation in conflicts and for being friends with everyone, Qatar's involvement in the Libyan revolution indicated a shift in the small State's foreign policy pattern. Qatar was indeed the most active Gulf State in the Libyan affair, having called for the 22 February Arab League session during which Libya's membership was suspended and being the first Arab country to recognise the Libyan

⁸² "Saudi Arabia, Libya restoring full diplomatic ties", *The Daily Star*, 2 January 2012, accessible online at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Article.aspx?id=158539#axzz31SJWq7qh>, accessed 08/05/2014.

⁸³ "Saudis propose Saudi Libyan business council", *Libya business news*, 19 November 2012, accessible online at <http://www.libya-businessnews.com/2012/11/19/saudis-propose-saudi-libyan-business-council/>, accessed 08/05/2014.

⁸⁴ "Libya endeavors to encourage Gulf investments", *Alarabiya*, 4 February 2013, accessible online at <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/04/264363.html>, accessed 08/05/2014.

⁸⁵ "A post-Qaddafi pause", *The Economist*, 5 October 2013, accessible online at <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21587265-despite-opportunities-most-foreign-investors-are-so-far-staying-away-post-qaddafi-pause>, accessed 08/05/2014.

⁸⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Libya and the Gulf: Revolution and Counter-revolution", op. cit.

⁸⁷ Robert Fisk, "America's secret plan to arm Libya's rebels", *The Independent*, 7 March 2011, accessible online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/americas-secret-plan-to-arm-libyas-rebels-2234227.html>, accessed 06/03/2014.

National Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people in 28 March 2011. Qatar had also agreed to export Libyan oil from the rebel-controlled areas for the rebels, via Qatar Petroleum.⁸⁸

The role Qatar played in championing Libya's revolution proved to be crucial on many levels. On the diplomatic level, Qatar facilitated reaching a consensus among Arab states inside the Arab League pushing for an international intervention against Qaddafi. Doha also hosted the first meeting of the Libya Contact Group in April 2011.⁸⁹ Logistically, Qatar played an important role in the supply of provisions such as walkie-talkies, Chevrolet SUVs, but also heavy weapons to the rebels.⁹⁰ Militarily, Qatar participated in the NATO-led operation in Libya with six warplanes and offered training to the rebels.⁹¹ On the media level, Libyan rebels benefited from supportive Al Jazeera media coverage. Moreover, Qatar helped launching the satellite channel speaking in the name of the rebels, *Libya li kul al-ahrar* (Libya for all the free), which broadcasted from Doha.

In Libya, like in Egypt, Qatar channeled its support for Islamist groups. According to Guido Steinberg, most of Qatar's financial and military support to Libyan rebels was directed to militias linked to the Muslim brotherhood, specifically to the ex-Jihadist Abdelhakim Belhadj, formerly member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and to Ali al-Salabi who was imprisoned under Qaddafi.⁹² Doha's support for Libyan Islamists led many politicians to express their discontent with the role Qatar plays in post-Qaddafi Libya.⁹³

⁸⁸ "Qatar recognises Libyan rebels after oil deals", *Aljazeera English*, 28 March 2011, accessible online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/201132814450241767.html>, accessed 12/5/2014.

⁸⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Small states with a big role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the wake of the Arab Spring", op. cit., p. 13.

⁹⁰ Steven Soloff, "Why the Libyans have fallen out of love with Qatar", *Time Magazine*, 2 January 2012, accessible online at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2103409,00.html>, accessed 8/05/2013.

⁹¹ "UAE and Qatar pack an Arab punch in Libya operation", *Jerusalem Post*, 31 March 2011, accessible online at <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/UAE-and-Qatar-pack-an-Arab-punch-in-Libya-operation>, accessed 17/5/2014.

⁹² Guido Steinberg, "Qatar and the Arab Spring : support for Islamists and new anti-Syrian policy", accessible online at http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C07_sbg.pdf, p. 5. ,accessed 8/05/2013.

⁹³ Sam Dagher, Charles Levinson & Margaret Coker, "Tiny Kingdom's huge role in Libya draws concern", *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 October 2011, accessible online at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970204002304576627000922764650>, accessed 07/05/2014; "Does Qatar share the West's agenda in Libya ?", *Time Magazine*, 5 October 2011, accessible online at <http://world.time.com/2011/10/05/does-qatar-share-the-west-s-agenda-in-libya/>, accessed 07/05/2014

Conclusion

The national role conception theory assumes that we could predict foreign policy decisions and actions on the basis of the knowledge we have of a particular State's national role conception.⁹⁴ Our case, however, proved that in the context of regional turbulence, States might take foreign policy actions that are not necessarily compatible with their role conception. Hence, this paper attempted to prove that, in contrast with Khalevi Holsti's argument, role conceptions are not necessarily independent variables that dictate actions in foreign policy but can become dependent on the effects of a turbulent regional event affecting the State's strategic interests.

In this context, it would have been difficult or even counterproductive for both Saudi Arabia and Qatar to formulate their reactions to the Arab uprisings according to their initial national role conceptions, Saudi Arabia as a guarantor of stability and status quo and Qatar as a mediator and "voice of the oppressed Arab citizens". In order to attain their strategic objectives reducing risks and seizing opportunities, a certain transformation in the national role conception of each State had to occur in order to accommodate with the emerging post-Arab uprisings regional order and both States' perceptions of it.

The outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in late 2010 represented the perfect time for Qatar to finally harvest the gains of the foreign policy it has been pursuing since 1995. For this goal, a certain evolution had to happen in Qatar's role conception from a "mediator" to an "interventionist", daring to take sides and make hard decisions, which resulted in an overextension of the Qatari foreign policy that far exceeded the small State's structural geopolitical realities. In the case of Bahrain, Qatar was obliged to step back and refrain from supporting a popular revolt inside the Gulf, as it did with the other revolts, respecting a "red line" imposed by the Saudis and the GCC as a whole, which shows the limits of the role Qatar has been pursuing.

For Saudi Arabia, a similar evolution had to occur in its role conception in the context of the Arab uprisings, from a "guarantor of stability and conservatism" to a "regional leader". In fact, Riyadh understood that in order to survive in such a revolutionary context, it cannot survive

⁹⁴ K. J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 1970, p. 298.

by only privileging regional status quo and countering every single uprising in the region. It rather adopted a multiform and multidimensional strategy ranging from counterrevolution, to adaptation, to directly supporting revolutionary movements. Saudi Arabia captured the magnitude of the Arab uprisings and their strategic effects on the whole region and the historic role the Kingdom could play in the re-making and shaping of the regional order.

A quest for regional leadership proved necessary for Saudi Arabia to assume that role, amidst a historic moment characterised by the deep weakness of the classic regional powers (namely Egypt, Syria and Iraq). Since 2011, Saudi Arabia understood that the power vacuum in the Middle East, what Marc Lynch called the “dissolution of power”⁹⁵, along with the United States’ disengagement from the region, are deeply endangering its interests in the region and hence a more assertive regional role is necessary. In context, the way the Kingdom successfully managed the threats posed the Arab uprisings at least in the short-term, went beyond its classic conservatism in its support for a regime change in Libya (also in Syria), and attempted to consolidate its power inside the GCC prove that Saudi Arabia is looking for a leadership position in the region. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia’s quest for regional leadership is, of course, not without challenges.

⁹⁵ Marc Lynch, “The Middle East power vacuum”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2013, accessible online at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/25/the_middle_east_power_vacuum, accessed 11/05/2014.