

The [Treaty of Westphalia](#) in 1648 has been touted as the foundation of the concept of the state as we know it today on the basis of autonomy, sovereignty and territoriality. But the fact is that state-building around the world did not conform to the Western model always with non-state actors playing a significant role and depriving the state of the monopoly of violence and governance. The formation of nation-states is a rather complex process, attempting to forge unity through a collective past that is often constructed. This attempt might not often be successful and the contradictions and differences within emerge later, favouring the growth of non-state actors who undermine the state. The chances of this happening are greater when the state fails to engage with all sections of the society and in the absence of outlets to voice grievances.

The term non-state actor is a broad one encompassing civil society, non-government organisations, terrorist and religious groups, media, multinational companies, tribes and even families. States sometimes seek their help to provide services which the states themselves are not able to while sometimes they pose a challenge to the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state. At a juncture when International Relations itself cannot be restricted to the interactions between states, it is not surprising that non-state actors become increasingly significant in the defence policy of a state or an organisation.



GCC Military Chiefs/ Image source: Arab News

## **The defence policy of GCC (or a lack thereof)**

The [GCC](#) was founded in 1981 as a platform to voice the interests of the six West Asian kingdoms, especially in relation with Iran and Iraq who had been vying for regional hegemony. They were united by monarchical forms of government, Sunni Islam and dependence on oil revenues. The organisation had enunciated a policy of self-reliance with regard to defence as the region seemed to develop into a seat of rivalry between the superpowers US and USSR but was forced by circumstances to accept and approve American intervention during the Iran Iraq war and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Alarmed by the US decision to maintain its presence in the region, the GCC considered joining Egypt and Syria in an Arab peacekeeping force but was dissuaded by Washington. Eventually, the GCC states found the American presence reassuring. This was particularly true in the case of Saudi Arabia who offered the US the access to its oil resources in return for arms and the promise for stability and protection in case of aggression by external forces, terrorist groups or dissidents.

The GCC which had initially kept its defence capabilities low key so as to not invite hostilities from Iraq or Iran did manage to improve and upgrade its defence structure by increasing the strength of its military wing Peninsula Shield force, installing an early warning system and signing an agreement that called for mutual cooperation and assistance in the event of external aggression, marking a departure from the earlier stance of addressing only issues common to the economic and political interests of all member states. Over the years, the GCC has been unable to effectively intervene in conflicts of the region due to fear of Saudi domination, undue dependence on external intervention and differences of opinion that have resulted in a three-way division within the organisation. However, keeping the limitations of the organisation aside, the increasing involvement of non-state actors in the region has made the formulation and pursuit of a well-defined defence policy difficult in the first place.

## **The resurgence of tribal identities**

Arabian societies had been highly tribal in nature with people owing to a high degree of allegiance to their respective tribes. Life in the desert necessitated the formation of tribes since a person or family alone had little chance of survival. As they found resources and established settlements, they also took care to exclude the entry of others, further cementing the tribe as a cohesive unit and a marker of identity. These tribes had been highly autonomous and have fought with each other since before Islam but were subsumed under the modern state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though their economic and political relevance

was almost lost, they continued to be a social identity and hence were viewed by the state with ambivalence. On one hand, they posed a threat if the state became weak and on the other, disrespecting or ignoring tribal sentiments altogether might aggravate tensions. Thus tribes that supported the ruling family became beneficiaries of a grand web of patronage, with the leaders often paid by the governments. Tribes have been used and glorified as a component of national identity while the government also tightly regulated and restricted the use of tribe name in the public domain.

As the resurgence of tribes as political units might threaten the legitimacy of the state, anti-regime tribes can be propped up by a rival state. The Saudi government, for instance, unsuccessfully tried to mobilize tribes against the Emir of Qatar during the recent Qatar diplomacy crisis. The primal tribes may exercise more power on people's consciousness than the modern nation-state and become more influential in the event of the latter becoming weaker. The security and stability of Gulf states is dependent not just on domestic factors and so the reappearance of tribal networks in war zones like [Libya](#), [Syria](#), Iraq and [Yemen](#) is of considerable concern.



Hezbollah/ Image source: Middle East Eye

## Fundamentalists and proxies in conflict zones

While Sunnis constitute the majority in most GCC states, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon have majority Shia populations. The Islamic revolution of 1979 led by the Shia cleric Ayatollah Khomeini that successfully replaced the Shah and sought to spread Shia clerical rule brought to the fore the old competition between Shias and Sunnis over the leadership of Islam. The siege of Mecca in 1979 which is often described as the first terror attack on Saudi and the Khobar towers bombing of 1996 reportedly carried out by Iran backed fundamentalists soured Saudi Iran relations further. This fear of Shia hegemony caused Saudi to promote the extreme version of Sunni faith Wahhabism, to implement harsher controls on personal liberties and to sponsor militias who fought primarily against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan but also suppressed the growth of Shia movements. Saudi also went on to support Iraq in the Iran Iraq war.



Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Badie / Image source: AFP

The struggle for hegemony in the region has seen the extensive use of proxies, especially by Iran which lacks conventional military power. Thus Saudi Arabia which fears the emergence of Iran puts up a rivalling set of proxies, making proxy wars a part of almost all the conflicts

in West Asia. While Hezbollah, Houthis and Hamas are Iran's proxies, Kurds and various dissident groups in Iran have received Saudi assistance and backing. The involvement of Sunni fundamentalist organisations like Al Qaeda and ISIS makes the situation further complex. The increasing influence of these Sunni groups manifest in the large flow of money and fresh recruits is worrying to the GCC, especially in light of the terrorists' perception of the states as violators of faith that culminated in the ISIS's lofty ambition of establishing a state. These groups make use of social media to disseminate their ideology and to attract followers from far and wide and adopt a highly decentralized structure whereby a single follower or a small group can undertake missions. The spurt in such activities post Arab Spring has forced the GCC states to adopt counterterrorism measures like cracking down on extremist preachers, arresting people found guilty of financing terrorist organisations, rehabilitation programmes, monitoring of cyber world to prevent online radicalisation and joining international counter-terrorism initiatives. The GCC states have been increasingly receiving assistance from the West in this regard, inviting further accusations from the terrorists who harbour extreme anti-West sentiments.

The Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests that made the monarchies uneasy was remarkable for the active participation of civil society and multifarious groups. It had begun in Tunisia and spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. While most GCC states saw the movement as a threat, particularly in light of the presence of Shia dissidents, Qatar sponsored the [Muslim Brotherhood](#), an Islamist party that spearheaded the agitation in certain countries. The Tunisian dictator Ben Ali who was successfully deposed by the protesters had been offered refuge by Saudi Arabia while Qatar extended generous financial support to the Islamist government that succeeded his regime. In Egypt, Qatar-backed Muslim Brotherhood emerged successful in the elections that followed Hosni Mubarak's ouster but was deposed through a military coup supported by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain. Similarly, after the Libyan despot, Muammar Gaddafi was killed, Qatar backed coalition lost the 2014 elections but captured the capital city of Tripoli while the UN recognised elected government which enjoys the support of UAE, Russia and Egypt have been forced to withdraw to Tobruk. This difference of opinion regarding foreign policy has led to economic and transport blockades on and severing of diplomatic ties with Qatar by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE citing the former's alleged support of terrorism. The Qatar crisis has cleft the organisation into three groups with Bahrain, UAE and Saudi Arabia forming an anti-Qatar bloc and Oman and Kuwait attempting to adopt a middle path.

Conflicts and crises often prepare fertile grounds for the growth of sectarian identities. The Shias who had been oppressed by Saddam Hussein and slightly outnumbered the Sunnis gained power after his execution. This invited a Sunni backlash, not least from the ISIS. The

GCC has been improving its relations with Iraq in order to resist Iranian resurgence. Similarly, the decades of rule by the Al Assad family in Syria had oppressed the majority Sunnis while granting privileges to the minority Shia sect Alawis. While the Sunnis joined groups like Islamic Front, Ahrar Al-Sham and the Al Qaeda affiliate Nusra Front that fought against Assad regime in the war that followed the Arab Spring protests and received support from the GCC, the Shias joined an Iran backed group called National Defence Force that fought for Assad. A few Sunni rebels later parted ways with the anti-Assad side to establish their own caliphate and Shia militias from Iraq as well as Hezbollah joined the pro-Assad forces. It was the Al Qaeda of Iran who made the most of the vacuum in Syria, however, to establish the ISIS which went on to defy orders from the Al Qaeda and turned extremely violent and ambitious, inviting retaliation from the US and its allies including Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Though repeated attempts by Yemen to join GCC had been met with a rebuff, the protests against former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh who had been a Saudi ally were viewed with concern by Saudi since instability and chaos in Yemen would affect it too, particularly with respect to its southern border. As the protests grew in strength and number, the GCC was forced to broker an agreement that brought about Saleh's resignation and his replacement by Abdurabbuh Mansur Hadi. The GCC planned a National Dialogue Conference that promised to bring together all stakeholders to oversee the making of the new constitution. Even after its conclusion, chaos persisted with the supposedly Iran backed Houthis taking over the Presidential Palace and forcing Hadi to resign. Hadi supporters called for external intervention and a Saudi led coalition obliged with an intervention against Houthis that went on for long and has been temporarily stopped because of COVID-19. The involvement of the Southern separatists who demand the secession of South Yemen in addition to the crumbling structures of governance makes a GCC mediated solution unlikely, if not impossible.



Arab Spring demonstration/ Image source: Getty

### **Need for greater inclusivity**

The [Arab Spring](#) has been famously described as people demanding the change of status from subjects to citizens. The GCC states offer lucrative public employment, subsidies and free services to the citizens in exchange for their consent. Though this seems to work on a superficial level, it expects passivity from the citizens and fails to produce a sense of belonging or the consciousness of being a stakeholder in the nation's growth or progress. Granting of individual freedoms, ensuring participation in decision making by way of decentralization and anti-corruption initiatives have been demanded by activists for a long time and the reforms were undertaken so far appear cosmetic before the mysterious killings, disappearances and unjustified arrests of dissidents. Transnational and subnational identities gain more prominence in the absence of trust between the citizens and the government.

The changing nature and structure of terrorist groups necessitate steps which address

underlying grievances that cause people to feel alienated rather than conventional security measures, punishment or strict enforcement of anti-terror laws often misused by states to silence critics and dissidents. As the local and the international are often inextricably linked, the GCC states need to look inwards and make governance more inclusive and respectful of human rights. This would demand greater transparency through better communication between the citizens and the government and engagement with a host of non-state actors like non-government organisations, media and women. As non-state actors are becoming more and more significant day by day, it is only natural that they become unavoidable stakeholders in solutions to today's problems.

## Subscribe to the International Relations Updates by The Kootneeti

\* indicates required

Full Name

Email Address \*

Subscribe

made with  mailchimp





*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team*

Facebook Comments