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**SAUDI ARABIA AND THE SMALLER GULF STATES:
THE VASSALS TAKE THEIR REVENGE**

Introduction

Towards the end of 2004, in Bahrain, something very strange happened. Actually, it was even unthinkable until very recently: Saudi Arabia boycotted in December the annual summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (the GCC). Or, to be more accurate, Prince Abdallah, the *de facto* ruler of the Kingdom, decided to boycott the summit.

It is not the first time that a GCC summit or gathering is boycotted by a leader or a delegation. Qatar, the UAE or Bahrain have all done it or threatened to do it. But each time, the Saudi government found words strong enough to criticize this behaviour as irresponsible. The GCC being a key instrument of the Saudi influence over the Gulf monarchies since its inception in the early eighties, it was hard to imagine a Saudi boycott of such a summit.

The reason given for this absence was that Saudi Arabia was deeply annoyed by the fact Bahrain, the host of the summit, had signed a free trade agreement with the United States last September. Ostensibly, Saudi Arabia complained that such a treaty was weakening the GCC, since it was offering better trade conditions to an outsider – namely the US – that those governing the trade between the GCC countries, which are supposed to achieve a common market.

Arguably, the point made by the Saudi government has some validity. But no-one believes it was the real motivation of the Saudi anger. This was a pretext, not the reason. The background of this squabble is that the kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been steadily losing its grip on the other five partners of the GCC since September 11th, 2001, and even more so since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003.

The Gulf Cooperation Council: a tool of the Saudi power

The Arab Gulf Cooperation Council held its first meeting in Abu Dhabi in May 1981. The project of forming a regional alliance originated in Iran, but the imperial ambitions of the Shah met with less than lukewarm response from the monarchies across the Gulf. Later, the Islamic revolution, which Khomeini intended to export in the Arabian Peninsula rendered the project obsolete. Iraq, too, was striving for an increased influence among the Arab states of the Peninsula. In February 1980, Saddam Hussein tried, without much success, to sell his idea of a "National Arab Charter" banning foreign military presence in the region, Iraq presenting itself as the sword of the Arab nation. But the start of the Iraq-Iran war in September 1980 cleared the way for a regional gathering excluding both Iran and Iraq. The six Gulf oil monarchies were forming a club of sorts, a syndicate of dynasties, so to speak, whose main objective although never publicly stated, was the preservation of the ruling families and their power.

On paper, the six founding members were equal. But like in George Orwell's *Animal farm*, one of the six was by far "more equal" than the others. For Saudi Arabia, it was an achievement as the GCC structure materialized the Saudi influence over its neighbours which was effectively opposed by the British as Abdelaziz Ibn Saud was building his kingdom. In the early XXth century, whenever Abdelaziz and his men tried to conquer the Hasa the "Pirates' Coast", Kuwait, parts of Iraq, Transjordan or Yemen, the British army stopped them. Eventually, Ibn Saud was left with no alternative but to sign with London a number of treaties by which he recognized the borders imposed by the British. Because of Great Britain, the Arabian Peninsula was therefore not entirely 'saudised'. Half a century later, what Saudi Arabia couldn't get by force was obtained, at least partially, through diplomacy.

Militarily, among its partners, only Oman can match Saudi forces. Which is most probably the main reason why the Saudis did all they could to wreck Sultan Qabous' initiative, when in the aftermath of the Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Oman favoured the creation of a 100 000 strong GCC army in order to reduce the dependence of its members toward foreign forces.

To be sure, the order disputes had never been truly solved when Saudi Arabia was founded. A number of those disputes were still lingering between the kingdom and its neighbours, when, in 1990, Kuwait's invasion by Iraq brought back to the forefront all these virtual border conflicts. Between Saudi Arabia, Oman and Abu Dhabi, the Buraymi oasis controversy had been only provisionally solved by the dispatching of British units which stopped the Saudi progression. The fact that oil fields are spread beneath the "three borders region" only adds fuel to the fire. Agreements signed in 1974 and 1977 do not settle everything. The same can be said about the border agreement signed in 1965 with Qatar as well as the one signed with Kuwait. The latter, which is limited to dividing the former neutral zone, says nothing, for example, of the maritime borders delimitation. With the Sultanate

of Oman, everything remains to be done. But of course, none of these conflicts in the making are potentially as explosive as the border dispute between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, despite the signing of the 1934 Ta'if Treaty, by which Yemen surrendered three provinces to king Abdelaziz's new country, namely Jizzan, Najran and Asir.

Over the years, Saudi Arabia has deliberately refused to settle these disputes, as, within the framework of bilateral relations, it was occasionally using them as pressure tools to impose its will on its neighbours. On both sides, it was obvious that, in case the conflict would cease to be virtual and degenerate into a real one, Saudi Arabia would no doubt be the winner.

Diplomatic setbacks

But this conventional wisdom has suffered two major setbacks in the aftermath of the Kuwait war.

In 1992, a border incident between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Khafus, similar to many such ones occurring in the Arabian Peninsula where borders are ill-delineated and rarely demarcated, escalated to unexpected proportions. The skirmishes which occurred on September 30th, 1992 between Qatar and Saudi soldiers left three dead. Moreover, instead of minimizing the incident as was usually the case under such circumstances, the Qatari authorities gave it maximum publicity and accused Saudi Arabia of attempting to seize part of its territory. The Khafus incident marked the beginning of a long period of tension between Riyadh and Doha which, twelve years on, is not over yet.

Contrary to what might have been expected, it is the larger and stronger state which is put on the defensive by the smaller one. Of course, most of the other Gulf monarchies considered that Qatar was wrong in its aggressive behaviour which was not in line with the usual relations between "sisterly countries". But there was also a sense of satisfaction to see a small shaikhdom teaching a lesson to a kingdom which had often treated them with the arrogance of a powerful suzerain.

The second and more serious setback for Saudi Arabia occurred in May 1994, when a civil war broke out in Yemen. Four years earlier, Saudi Arabia had officially joined with other Arab countries in praise of the unification of South and North Yemen. But the truth of the matter is that, from a Saudi perspective, a unified Yemen was a major strategic threat: the new Yemen was poor, republican, and a population which equaled the Saudi population. Moreover, the Yemeni population and government alike had never accepted the loss of the three provinces conquered sixty years earlier by king Abdelaziz. Indeed, ever since the unification in May 1990, the Yemeni leaders had insisted on renegotiating the Ta'if Treaty, which was due to expire soon. At first, the Saudis did not respond. Then, in 1992, due to international pressure, they agreed to open negotiations. However, in various ways, they made sure that Yemen did not have it its way: for instance, Saudi Ara-

bia openly threatened foreign oil companies prospecting with a Yemeni license in the disputed border zone.

The Saudis escalated their financial and military assistance to tribal leaders challenging the central government of Sanaa. Not long after, providentially, the rift between President Saleh and his southern vice-president Ali Salim Al Baidh gave them the opportunity they had been waiting for. In May 1994, when the former South-Yemeni leadership announced the secession of the South, Saudi Arabia provided them with financial, military and political support, not with standing the fact that most of them were former communist leaders who stood for all that was diametrically opposite to Saudi Arabia's stated policies. But as usual, "the enemies of my enemies are my friends"... Therefore, it should have come as no surprise that when the Foreign ministers of the GCC countries met, on June 4th and 5th at Abha, a Saudi city close to the Yemeni border, they implicitly recognized the secessionist republic. If the final communiqué stopped short of formally doing so, it was due to the fact that Qatar had steadfastly opposed it, largely because at the time, Qatari diplomacy's main driving force was a resolute opposition to anything favoured by Saudi Arabia. A few weeks later, the defeat of the separatists, overpowered by government forces, showed in retrospect that the GCC in general and Saudi Arabia in particular had escaped a diplomatic humiliation. Riyadh's short-sighted strategy, entirely, focused on how to weaken its southern neighbour, had not paid sufficient attention to the actual balance of forces on the ground between the government and the rebels.

A few months later, from October 1994 to January 1995, the Saudi-Yemeni tension was again at its peak, with heavy concentration of troops on both sides of the border. However, the military confrontation did not take place eventually. According to all likelihood, in the meantime, the Saudi leaders had given the situation the required thinking they had not previously. As a result of this brain-storming, they decided to reassess Saudi Arabia's border disputes with all of its neighbours.

The negotiations following this bottom-up review brought about a new border agreement between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, signed in June 2000, which replaced the Ta'if Treaty. Meantime, the remaining border disputes Saudi Arabia had with its other neighbours were also renegotiated. With Oman, a first agreement had been signed as early as 1990, leading to a formal exchange of maps in 1995. With Kuwait, after dividing the former Neutral Zone, the delimitation of maritime borders was still pending. Politically, the negotiations ended in January 2001 but technical discussions were still under way last year.

Things did not go so smoothly with the United Arab Emirates. The 1974 and 1977 agreements had deprived Abu Dhabi from a direct access to Qatar, since a Saudi strip of land reaches the sea a Khor Odeid, where Saudi Arabia has built a naval base located just between Qatar and the UAE. But around 1977-1998, when Saudi Arabia was busy mending its relations with Iran, the UAE felt they were sacrificed by its major GCC partner. The usually soft-spoken Emirati Foreign minister Rashed Abdallah openly accused Saudi Arabia of renegeing on its solidarity vis-à-vis the three islands occupied by Iran on the eve of the independence of the UAE.

Until then, all GCC members had staunchly supported the UAE on this issue while I was trying to bring Iran to the negotiating table. However, Rashed Abdallah's outburst met with sarcasm and scorn from the Saudi Defence minister Prince Sultan, which, in turn, increased the resentment in the Emirates. Therefore, one shouldn't have been surprised when, in April 1999, the UAE boycotted a meeting of Oil ministers convened by the Saudis in the border zone, when they officially inaugurated the Shaybah oil field. This oilfield lies beneath the controversial zone of Buraymi. From an Emirati perspective, the Saudis illegally seized an oil field belonging to them. Since the UAE were known to be usually compliant with Saudi Arabia, this very boycott was a vivid reminder of the resentment felt by its smaller neighbours towards Saudi behaviour.

Bahrain had no territorial dispute with Saudi Arabia. Since the 30's, however, it had one with Qatar regarding the sovereignty over the Hawar islands and the Fasht al Dibel reefs which were given to Bahrain by Britain despite being closer to Qatar. Since the armed skirmishes between the two sheikhdoms in April 1986, this conflict has poisoned not only their bilateral relations but also the working atmosphere within the GCC itself. In 1987, Saudi Arabia attempted a mediation, but it ended in failure. Qatar was infuriated by the obvious bias in favour of Bahrain by the mediator. Bahrain, for its part, was no less disappointed in King Fahd's decision not to support fully and openly Bahrain's position. As a result, the referee has managed to anger both parties. Eventually, it is the judgement of the International Court of Justice in The Hague which succeeded in putting an end to the conflict in March 2000. This success underlines the scope of the Saudi fiasco, especially as for several years, the Grand Mufti of the kingdom, Shaikh Abdelaziz Ibn Baz, had ruled that resorting to the arbitration of non – Islamic body was prohibited.

If we consider that, broadly speaking, the relations governing Saudi Arabia and the smaller Arab Gulf states resembled as feudal relationship, arbitration of conflicts between vassals is a key responsibility of the Lord. In this respect, Saudi Arabia has undoubtedly failed and, in the process, lost a good deal of its legitimacy as a suzerain.

Saudi Arabia is no longer America's strategic priority

On a regional level, Saudi Arabia, which in the 70's had forced Kuwait and Bahrain to put an end to their parliamentary experiments, had to witness in the 90's the proliferation of elected assemblies among its neighbours. Confronted by this democratic emulation, the Saudi authorities have steadily emphasised the specificity of the kingdom and praised the *majlis al-shura*, the consultative council entirely appointed by the king which was put in place in 1993. But towards the end of 2003, their tune had changed and the Saudi government announced municipal elections. To be sure, the combination of internal and American pressure explains to a large extent this turnabout. But those who favour a wider political participation inside the kingdom would most proba-

bly have had a tougher time if they couldn't have argued that the democratic experiment worked in favour of the ruling families in the neighbouring monarchies.

Looking back at the decade which just ended, the Saudi regime has a history of accumulated setbacks. Internally, King Fahd's continuing illness has not entirely cleared the way for the reforms promoted by Prince Abdallah, who is prevented from acting effectively by leading princes. Border disputes, which no long ago were used by Riyadh to pressure its neighbours, have turned against the kingdom's interests. The democratization wave around Saudi Arabia has weakened the authoritarian model of the House of Saud, who is further weakened by the consequences of September 11. Moreover, the United States, a key ally for more than half a century, is at present openly wary of the Saudi regime and doesn't seem any longer to consider its survival a strategic priority. Saudi Arabia, long considered America's main ally in the Gulf, has been stripped of this position.

The very loss of this status which, until recently, was enough to intimidate Arabia's neighbour, was not lost on the latter. Qatar was quick in taking advantage of the new situation. The most striking example is the transfer to Qatar in April 2003 of the American troops stationed until then at the Prince Sultan base at Kharj, near Riyadh. Ironically, the official announcement of the transfer was made by Donald Rumsfeld, the American Defence Secretary on April 29th, on the very day Qatar was holding a referendum to adopt the constitution designed to transform the shaikhdom into a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy.

Conclusion

The recent decision by Bahrain to sign a free trade agreement with the USA, which led to Prince Abdallah's boycott of the GCC summit in Manama, is the latest sign that the smaller Gulf monarchies, due to the implicit backing of the United States, are no longer afraid to stand up to Saudi Arabia.

In 1971, the then Saudi king Faisal had to accept that the Gulf rulers he had always considered as vassals had become heads of state like himself, following the decision by Great Britain to withdraw from the Gulf – Great Britain which had decades earlier prevented his father from conquering the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. Ten years later, the creation of the Gulf cooperation council was a *de facto* recognition of Saudi domination over the Gulf oil monarchies.

But since September 11, 2001, and above all, the invasion of Iraq by American forces in the Spring 2003, we have witnessed a reversal of this process. Under the sponsorship and protection of the United States of America, the smaller sheikhdoms are freeing themselves from Saudi trusteeship. They have become bold enough to openly pursue a different path from that advocated by the Saudis. And, by embracing a new pattern of political participation (thoroughly appreciated by Washington) the tiny emirates – the former vassals – now go as far as presenting themselves as a model for Saudi Arabia – once their suzerain.