

Dialogues in Pandemic Politics: COVID19 and the Struggle to Re-Order Relations in the Persian Gulf

On the 24th March 2020, an emergency summit comprised of Finance Ministers from the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) took place. The summit was extra-ordinary: In addition to being the first meeting with Qatari participation since the blockade of 2017, it took place online amidst the growing coronavirus pandemic. In a moment of optimism, it appeared that the 6 member states of the GCC could begin to find points of commonality beyond the blockade, moving on from a bitter dispute that had proved incredibly disruptive to all involved (Ulrichsen, 2020). Yet in spite of this optimism, the complexities of regional politics within the covid19 pandemic made serious rapprochement unattainable at this point in time.

One of the main charges levied at Qatar was engagement with Iran, a long-standing rival of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, other Arab Gulf states, Israel and the USA. It was somewhat surprising then that following the onset of the covid19 pandemic, the Islamic Republic declared that a process of coordination had taken place with the UAE, in direct contrast with a previous manifestation of regional order which sought to marginalize Iran and reduce its influence across the Gulf and wider Middle East. This process, coming during the early months of the pandemic – although later eroded – posed questions about the extent to which the coronavirus crisis was the conduit for re-ordering regional politics, or whether this move was more opportunistic.

In times of crisis it is often said that everything has changed or, conversely, that nothing has changed. The reality, of course, typically lies somewhere in between, reflecting the subtleties and nuances of context specific contingencies. Regional politics across the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East is no different. In the coming months, GCC member states began to forge their own paths in regional affairs, aided and constrained by the context of the pandemic. In what follows I offer a brief set of reflections about the impact of the covid19 pandemic on the Persian Gulf, with a particular focus on regional politics.

Over the past decade, regional politics across the Persian Gulf - and within the GCC in particular - has increasingly been characterised by suspicion and mutual distrust. Predominantly appearing in the guise of tensions between the Arab side of the Gulf on the west and the Iranian side on the east - divisions which are exacerbated by ethnicity, religion, economics, geopolitics, demographics, and geography - are coupled with intra-Arab and intra-GCC tensions about the nature of regional order.

Yet at times of crisis, as Michael Barnett (1998) astutely observed, opportunities emerge to reshape the nature of relations. In what follows I reflect on Barnett's Constructivist take to explore the nature of Persian Gulf politics at a regional level. Other contributors to this special issue take a deeper dive into the intricacies of political, social, economic, governance and human rights concerns and, as such, I will largely steer clear of such observations. Instead, I will engage in a broader set of reflections about the nature of regional order and the impact of 'black swan' events on changing order.

From *Dialogues in Arab Politics* to *Dialogues in Pandemic Politics*

For Michael Barnett, writing in *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (1998) moments of crisis provide opportunities to renegotiate regional order by re-imagining the norms that shape this order. Central to this approach is a focus on the interaction of norms and identities in contrast to the more materially driven approach of Realists. Indeed, for Barnett, a struggle over the nature of ideational factors and the ways in which leaders derive legitimacy from identity and ideology offers a more convincing explanation of the ordering of regional politics.

Although predominantly concerned with a struggle over – and to define – Arabism, Barnett offers a constructivist account concerned both with the importance of identity and the construction of order through interactions at times of crisis. While there is not scope to go into the nature of crisis, the covid19 pandemic appears to meet many of the criteria for what many may conceive of as a crisis. Following Barnett's argument, times of regional uncertainty and crisis such as the coronavirus allow for a renegotiating of visions of regional order, bringing together key actors to engage in a process of dialogue over the nature of norms and identities, for both domestic and regional audiences, albeit with repercussions for regional order (1998).

While Middle Eastern politics was previously characterised by a struggle over Arabism, in recent years, order across the Gulf and wider Middle East has been underpinned by an overt anti-Iranianism which has often been fused with the Shi'a sect of Islam meaning that this regional ordering has domestic repercussions (Mabon, 2020a, 2013). The emergence of conflicts in Syria and Yemen post 2011, coupled with precarious political contexts in Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon, has created conditions that facilitate and exacerbate this anti-Iranian sentiment, often pitting Gulf Arab states – led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE – against Iran. Yet the early months of the pandemic hinted at a reimagining of regional order, particularly driven by the actions of the UAE, dissenting from the 'old order' and bringing out into the open an apparent thaw in relations with Iran. While ultimately short lived due to the normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel – once again bringing out into the open an existing set of discussions – the humanitarian cost of the covid19 pandemic presented the UAE with an opportunity to exert influence through the provision of aid, increasing its standing in the process.

Iran and the Gulf States

Since revolutionary fervour toppled the Shah of Iran and ultimately led to the establishment of an Islamic Republic in 1979, relations between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf – predominantly led by Saudi Arabia - have been fraught (Mabon, 2013). Oscillating between periods of overt hostility and burgeoning rapprochement, the Islamic Republic has been viewed with a great deal of trepidation by many in the Gulf due to competing visions of regional order. Competing claims to religious legitimacy supplement long-standing geopolitical visions about order and security in the Gulf, are exacerbated by contradictory views over the role of the United States in ensuring regional security.

Providing a complete history of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is beyond the scope of this paper but in the years after the revolution, a number of events that puncture this

history are worth noting (Mabon, 2020b). First, the revolution fused religion and politics and set the tone for the decades that followed. Second, after the catastrophic repercussions of the war with Iraq, Iran experienced a devastating earthquake which resulted in a catastrophic loss of life. Following the provision of humanitarian aid - and shuttle diplomacy between the two states, relations began to thaw, leading to a period of quasi rapprochement (Wastnidge, 2016). Third, with the declaration of the US' War on Terror and 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric, the apparent rapprochement between the two states ended, exacerbated by the Arab Uprisings and the sectarianization of regional politics that followed (Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Mabon, 2020a).

Central to the evolution of these relations are particular events that bring about a renegotiation of regional order. Indeed, following Barnett's argument, it is easy to see how relations have been re-worked at times of crisis, with the earthquake providing perhaps the best example of a crisis providing the capacity to move towards improving relations. Similarly, following the onset of the war on terror, relations were reset. In the years that followed, relations between Riyadh and Tehran deteriorated, exacerbated by the fragmentation of political projects and rising sectarian tensions, the two began to engage in a complex and vitriolic rivalry characterised by external engagement and often toxic discursive escalation.

Pandemic Possibilities

In line with Barnett's claim about the opportunities presented by the onset of crises, the emergence of the pandemic provided an opportunity to reset order in the Gulf. When covid19 hit Iran in the early months of 2020, the humanitarian crisis that followed was devastating. Close to 4000 were killed by the end of the first week of April, while an estimated 42,000 are shown to have died in government records, albeit almost triple what the government had publicly declared (BBC). Video footage coming out of a state already creaking under the strain of an international sanctions regime.

Efforts to trace the epicentre of regional cases quickly focussed on Iran and religious pilgrimages to the Islamic Republic. Although illegal to travel to Iran from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - and a source of concern in others - many routinely make the trip, often via intermediaries. The flow of people to - and from - Qom was heralded as the source of rise, leading to increasingly vitriolic sectarian rhetoric from some and the continued sectarianization of Shi'a groups. Yet closer exploration suggested that travel from Wuhan, the source of the virus, was responsible for infection rates in the Gulf. In spite of this, the pandemic highlighted political and social schisms within and across Gulf states, notably along sectarian lines (Matthiesen, 2020).

In response to the crisis, a number of states began to send aid to the Islamic Republic, including from long-time rivals. Perhaps the most surprising of these states to provide aid was the United Arab Emirates (Galeeva, 2020) which had long been opposed to the Islamic Republic, engaging in military action in Yemen in an effort to counter Iranian gains (Juneau, 2020). The UAE's actions in providing were well received by Iranians, with Seyyed Abbas Mousavi declaring sincere thanks "for these humanitarian efforts" proclaiming that the Islamic Republic would "never forget the way they stood with Iran in hard times" (Mehr

News, 17.03.20). The actions demonstrate the capacity to override what previously appeared to be intractable differences and re-negotiating regional order in the process.

Yet across 2019 and into 2020, the UAE had sought to assert itself as a regional power across the Middle East, exerting influence in a range of different arenas. Central to this, however, was a move away from Saudi Arabia's vision for regional order, particularly with regard to Iran, but also over Yemen and Israel. The decision to engage with Iran was not purely a response to the pandemic. Indeed, underpinning this were a series of track II dialogues between the Emirates and Iran which had been taking place across 2018. In October 2019, the UAE released \$700 million of frozen funds to Iran as part of a burgeoning thaw in relations (Fenton-Harvey, 2020). The UAE also began a new form of soft power posturing, positioning itself as the world's largest aid donor during the pandemic, reflecting both national ambition and a new form of humanitarian diplomacy (Datta-Ray, 2020). While the decision to withdraw from Yemen suggested an emerging divergence away from Saudi Arabia, it was the move towards Iran that hinted at something more serious.

The Emirati approach highlighted the capacity to use the crisis as a means of re-imagining regional relations, moving beyond previous ways of ordering Gulf – and wider Middle Eastern – politics. The Emirati approach prompted calls for similar approaches from the United States towards Iran, notably the easing of the “maximum pressure” policy deployed by the Trump regime. In contrast, the Trump administration appeared unwilling to shift its stance.

Of course there are pragmatic reasons for such gestures and diplomatic overtures. The UAE was hit financially after sanctions were imposed on Iran given the complexity of economic relations with the two states, with the UAE one of Iran's largest trading partners. Moreover, a number of Emirati companies were blacklisted by the US for failing to comply with sanctions (Reuters, 19.03.20).

In spite of this goodwill, tensions remained high, stemming from the normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel, announced on the 13th August, which appears to have brought an end to any burgeoning rapprochement with Iran. Indeed, tensions manifested in the seizure of an Emirati vessel and the detention of its crew after Iranian fishermen were killed (Reuters, 20.08.20). Additionally, while aid was provided to Iran, the UAE appeared to support the continuation of US sanctions on Iran (Cole, 2020)

In contrast to the Emirati response, Saudi Arabia cordoned off the Eastern Province of the Kingdom, home to a large percentage of the Kingdom's Shi'a population after a number of citizens returned from Iran with the virus (The Guardian, 09.03.20). Supporting the Saudi position, Bahrain accused Iran of “biological aggression” covering up spread of virus and failing to stamp passports of Bahraini travellers visiting the country (Eltahir and Barrington, 11.03.20).

Although travelling to Iran is illegal, an amnesty was given to anyone who came forward to facilitate track and trace processes. Additionally, Riyadh also accused Iran of engaging in “irresponsible actions” in spreading the virus (Arab News, 2020). The Saudi response also

included efforts to block diplomatic measures designed to condemn US sanctions on Iran, deemed a “great pity” by Mousavi (Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Rejecting the Dialogue

With the UAE appearing to open up to dialogue with Iran and the reimagining of regional order, questions quickly emerged as to why Saudi Arabia appeared reluctant to embark on a similar path. Although the Kingdom had chosen not to respond with force to the Abqaiq attacks, despite appearing to have been given a green light to do so - instead choosing to call for restraint, much like after the killing of Qassim Soleimani (Mabon, 2020b) - the onset of the pandemic was met with stony silence. Unlike the events of 30 years earlier, Saudi Arabia did not engage in a reimagining of regional order.

A range of factors feed into this decision, demonstrating the myriad competing forces shaping domestic and regional politics. Thus, while Barnett argues that crises provide opportunities for reimagining regional relations, crises alone are not sufficient.

Unlike the 1990s, domestic developments were not conducive towards a burgeoning rapprochement. By the end of the 1980s developments in Iran - notably after the death of Ruhollah Khomeini - allowed space for more reform minded individuals to facilitate a thaw in relations. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia the actions of Crown Prince Abdullah were in concert with Iranian elites. In contrast, domestic politics in both states appeared to prohibit any form of dialogue with each other.

By the time of the Covid pandemic, Iran had been largely marginalised from the international community as a consequence of biting US sanctions, leading to a dramatic fall in economic growth from 13% in 2016 to minus 7.6% in 2019 (Salehi-Isfahani, 2020). In such a context, Iranian officials led by the Supreme Leader took a hard line against Saudi Arabia and the United States, leading to an increasingly complex and vitriolic struggle for regional order (Beck, 2020). In the Kingdom, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman deployed a similarly firm line against Iran, comparing the Islamic Republic’s leaders to Nazis (The Atlantic, 02.04.18).

Covid Challenges

Beyond the vitriol directed at each other, covid19 appeared to prompt a turn inwards to address domestic challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. Financial challenges brought about by the pandemic placed additional pressures on states and, in turn, raised questions about the articulation of national visions. Responses to the ensuing economic crisis ranged from budget cuts, spending freezes and the provision of financial support to banks and local business (Kozhanov and Zaccara, 2020). While Iran had previously struggled under “maximum pressure” sanctions, Arab Gulf states articulated opulent visions of the future, perhaps none grander than Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and its NEOM project.

At the same time, the dramatic fall in oil prices has decimated the Kingdom’s economy, challenging Vision 2030 - and its flagship project NEOM - whilst also placing additional strain on a state that had already been subjected to austerity measures. All the while, in 2018

Saudi military spending topped \$60 billion according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, leaving it with the 5th largest military budget in the world (Mabon, 2020).

Of course, a key justification for the Kingdom's military spending was the threat posed by Iran (Mabon, 2013). Yet in a surprising move, after attacks on the Abqaiq refinery in 2019, the Kingdom deployed a conciliatory tone, choosing to de-escalate, perhaps fearing the consequences of war with Iran. Another reading of this, of course, is the suggestion that this tone hid an inability to strike back against the Islamic Republic. These decisions were taken in the midst of rising pressure from the international community following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist, and the on-going war in Yemen.

COVID19 calls into question these aspirations. Moreover, it raises doubts about the sustainability of expensive foreign policy excursions; in Iran, protesters expressed anger at the millions of dollars given to Hizballah while Iranians struggled. Similarly, some have suggested that the UAE withdrew from the Yemen war over concerns at a rising cost. These incidents both occurred prior to the pandemic, demonstrating the precarious financial context affecting many before the onset of covid19 which was exacerbated by the dramatic fall in oil prices. In light of this, the Emirati decision to embark on a vast soft power campaign, underpinned by humanitarian aid during the pandemic appears surprising, but reveals the size of perceived gains that could be made by improving relations with Iran.

Further complicating regional order was the Emirati decision to normalise relations with Israel, once again building on long-standing working relationships (Jones and Guzansky: 2019). The decision of the UAE to normalise relations with Israel has perhaps put an end to this thaw in relations. Indeed, for many in Tehran, the normalisation of relations moves to solidify what has traditionally been an anti-Iranian alliance, reflecting a broader shift in regional politics. In response to normalisation, Ali Khamenei declared that the UAE would be "disgraced forever" by the the betrayal of Palestinians (Hafezi: 2020).

Taking the Temperature

The emergence of the COVID19 pandemic in early 2020 added a new range of challenges to strategic planners across the Gulf. In Iran, the virus spread rapidly, with a devastating loss of life. In contrast, while the death toll in Saudi Arabia was far lower, officials were forced to cancel the minor pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, and limit the number of pilgrims allowed to make *hajj* due, removing both a valuable income stream and eroding the Al Saud's main source of legitimacy. Changing domestic circumstances across the region placed additional pressure on foreign policy agendas. In Iran, economic hardship stemming from crippling sanctions imposed by the US meant that protesters took to the streets expressing anger at on-going financial support for groups including Hizballah. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's reform project set out in Vision 2030 faced an array of challenges, one of which was a dramatic increase in the cost of living.

In these increasingly precarious financial conditions, the Emirati decision to offer support for Iran – amongst others - within the context of its broader humanitarian aid policies appears somewhat surprising, but reveals a broader strategy of positioning itself as an influential

actor within global politics. The pandemic provided an opportunity for the UAE to do this, asserting how humanitarian credentials overrode longstanding anti-Iranian sentiment. Yet with an opportunity to assert more influence, particularly in Washington, meant that normalising relations with Israel was deemed more important. Perhaps then, we should view re-ordering of Gulf relations less with regard to Iran, and more with regard to an effort by the UAE to increase its influence on the region and global politics.

Ultimately, although the covid19 pandemic created conditions for a re-ordering of regional politics, such efforts must be positioned within structural factors found at domestic and international levels. Without scope for manoeuvring domestically and internationally, any efforts at redrawing regional relations will prove ultimately unsuccessful. Although humanitarian concerns provided opportunities for the UAE to exert greater influence, and hinted at a possible thaw in relations with Iran, the precarious nature of regional politics and lack of domestic will amongst many in Washington and Riyadh have prevented a broader recalibration of regional order. In part, this is a consequence of the organisation of global politics and the role played by the United States, particularly over Iran. Indeed, acknowledging the importance of Washington prompted the UAE and Bahrain to normalise relations with Israel as a means of ensuring influence in the US, regardless who wins the 2020 presidential election.

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