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The Fire in the Next Door: Popular Protests in Iran and the Responses from the GCC

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Introduction

The protests in Iran after [the killing of Mahsa Amini](#), 22-year-old Kurdish women, under the custody of morality police for not abiding the country's dress code on September 16, has put Tehran under the severe criticism from the Western capitals. Many people [across Europe](#) and the US were quick in rallying to show their solidarity with the protestors in Iran. On the official level, the [EU urged](#) Iranian authorities to end violence and imposed [sanctions](#) on Iran over the crackdown of the protests. The US [strengthened its sanctions](#) over Iran by designating 14 individuals and three entities, including Iran's morality police.

As immediate neighbors, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, despite their diverging perspectives towards Iran, remained mostly silent on the matter. A scrutiny over the regional reactions towards the Iranian protest might reveal significant insights on the Iran-GCC relations amid shifting geopolitical and domestic concerns.

The GCC Opts for Non-Interference

Since the first day of the protests in Iran, the six members of the GCC – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates-refrained from an official criticism towards the Iranian authorities. An examination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs websites reveals that none of the

GCC states released a statement about the protests in Iran. Only Oman released two statements about Iran since the popular demonstrations started: one about a diplomatic meeting and the other on the phone conversation between Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on October 17, 2022. Both statements promote the strengthening bilateral cooperation between the two [friendly countries](#) without mentioning the ongoing domestic turbulence and violent incidents in Iran.

Iranian protests found a wide coverage in some Gulf media circles. Qatar's Al Jazeera [English](#) and [Arabic](#) news websites have continued to cover the developments in Iran since the beginning of the protests. Doha News also published [a news article](#) sharing critical views and concerns of Iranians living in Qatar on the ongoing situation in Iran. For its part, some Saudi news outlets devoted a wide coverage about the protests in Iran. Arab News, one of the most read English news platforms in Saudi Arabia, has launched a [special coverage](#) "Iran Protests 2022", reporting domestic and international news, as well as commentaries on the events in Iran.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia's news coverage on the protests in Iran irked some political circles in Tehran. In mid-October, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) issued [a warning](#) about Saudi Arabia's Persian language media outlet Iran International's coverage of protests.

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IRGC Commander Hossain Salami [reportedly](#) said “You have entered our internal affairs through these media, but know that you are vulnerable. We told you to be careful”.

Beside news reports, it seems that this is a rare moment where all of the Gulf monarchies took similar official stances in the recent developments given their competing and conflicted record towards Iran. Although the popular unrests and the Iranian regime’s responses create a unique opportunity for the so-called anti-Iranian bloc within the GCC, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, to exploit, the recent geopolitical developments in the region and domestic political sensitivities of the GCC states prevent a hawkish official discourse towards Iran amid domestic turmoil.

The Geopolitical Context and Iran-GCC Rapprochement

The popular protests in Iran coincided a phase when the Middle East was in flux, almost a decade after the Arab Uprisings in 2011. The Russian offensive in Ukraine, the US retreat from the Middle East under Biden’s presidency and post-Pandemic global economic outlook have rendered political rapprochement among the so-called bitter enemies feasible, plausible and preferable. The most remarkable diplomatic thaw came from the Saudi-Emirati side in their normalization efforts with Iran. In late August, the [UAE announced](#) the resuming of full diplomatic relations with Iran, increasing the diplomatic relations in the rank of ambassador after a six years break since 2016. Saudi Arabia and Iran have also had five rounds of talks held in Iraq since January 2021. Iraqi foreign minister [Fuad Hussein](#) announced in

July that a public meeting with Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers would take place.

However, the war in Ukraine has changed the regional dynamics to an unprecedented scale. The recent OPEC+ decision to cut oil production by 2 million barrels per day, despite the US lobbying efforts against it, has put Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran and Russia in the same circle. The decision has placed Saudi Arabia under [severe criticism](#) in the US, accusing the kingdom of siding with Russia in the Ukraine War. Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman [dismissed](#) the claims and emphasized that the decision was taken unanimously and for purely economic reasons. “Although the OPEC+ decision, which was taken unanimously, was due to purely economic reasons, some accused the Kingdom of standing with Russia. Iran is also a member of OPEC, does this mean that the Kingdom is standing with Iran as well?” added Saudi Minister in [a tweet](#), avoiding any overt political cooperation with Iran.

Still however, it is safe to claim that the war in Ukraine has exposed the deeply changing nature of regional dynamics and foreign policy preferences in the GCC region. In this new configuration, Saudi and Emirati foreign policy moves dictate more balanced, well-calculated and pragmatic steps towards Iran. The GCC’s relatively muted stance towards the recent popular discontent in Iran can be viewed within this framework.

The Second Image: Domestic Concerns

As Arab Uprisings has revealed, a clear distinction between domestic and international spheres in politics is doomed to be futile in the Middle East. The inherited transnationalism of politics

in the Gulf always requires an emphasis on domestic politics and dynamics in assessing the GCC states foreign policy preferences. Therefore, the GCC's non-interference in the recent protests in Iran can be viewed as Gulf monarchies political sensitivities on regime sovereignty.

Accusing Iran of meddling in internal affairs of the Gulf States has been one of the most frequently used discursive strategies by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain since the Arab Uprisings. "Interference to stir sedition is unacceptable from a neighbor," [quoted](#) former Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal in 2012. More recently in 2019, Bahraini Interior Minister General Shaikh Rashid bin Abdulla Al-Khalifa [framed Iran](#) as relying on "fanning the flames of sectarianism to interfere in Bahrain's internal affairs blatantly". The examples are abundant. For different reasons, Oman, who is the staunchest supporter of non-interference in Iran's domestic affairs since the establishment of Iranian Islamic Republic, expectedly opts to stay away from any accusation towards Iranian regime.

Qatar was heavily wounded when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain imposed a blockade and attempted to meddle in Doha's internal affairs. Respecting the sovereignty emerged as the utmost theme in Qatar's foreign policy discourse after 2017 Gulf Crisis. During his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani urged the regional states to respect sovereignty in their relations with Iran. The Emir [said](#): "In order to achieve security and stability in the Gulf region, we renew the call that we have already launched from this podium, for conducting a constructive dialogue between the GCC countries and Iran on the basis of common

interests, the principle of good neighborliness, respect for the sovereignty of States and non-interference in their internal affairs". Qatar's response to the protests in Iran proves Doha's commitment to principles of non-interference in its relations with Iran.

Conclusion

It seems that the protests in Iran is a case where the regime sovereignty is a red line that GCC monarchies refrain from crossing even if it can be a [golden opportunity](#) for some GCC states to undermine Iran's image in the West, amid the prospect for the revival of nuclear deal between Iran and Western states. Two factors can explain this phenomenon. Geopolitically, given the ongoing war in Ukraine, energy and inflation crisis in the international markets, GCC investments in diplomatic thaw with Iran and the heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and the US have curbed incentives to official condemnation from GCC side to Iran. Domestically and discursively, Gulf States refrain to be hoist by their own petard and hypocritical to their citizens and international community by meddling in Iran's domestic affairs.

About the author

Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu is a PhD Candidate at the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, Turkey, and a Research Assistant in the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. Battaloglu obtained an MA Degree in Gulf Studies at Qatar University with a thesis on Turkey and Iran's soft power in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Her research interests are international relations of the Gulf monarchies, Turkey- GCC relations and identity and foreign policy nexus in the Gulf.

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