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**Gulf Affairs: What role does the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) play in facilitating collaboration among member states on security matters?**

**Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani:** This is a good first question because it serves to remind our readers that the GCC is made up of six active, dynamic, and independent states with a common geographical, historical, religious, and cultural heritage. Strengthened by these traditional ties, and fully aware of the challenges that abound within the region at this time, our member states consider regional security to be their number one priority and understand that national security is fatally compromised without GCC security. This is borne out by the very first of the GCC's strategic goals which is to protect ourselves against all threats, and as you shall see in answers to later questions, this is not something that we take for granted or lightly.

On all important strategic matters, but particularly on security, our leaders speak with one voice and have shown the political will to rise above the national level. As an example, the GCC Supreme Council in its most recent meetings has given important strategic direction on how to facilitate collaboration on security matters.

This has been done to ensure that all agencies involved in security—military, police, intelligence, diplomatic and so on—fully understand that close intra-GCC cooperation is essential. In addition, funds have been made available to emplace institutions, systems and mechanisms at the GCC level to enhance interoperability and the coordination of member states operations. As a result, our ability to fight as an alliance is moving from words to reality. Not only will this substantially improve both our capabilities and force multiplication, but it will also send a very clear message to would-be aggressors of our credibility and intent, thus hopefully acting as a deterrent.

### **Gulf Affairs: What are the main security challenges facing the GCC states? How is the GCC responding to these challenges? Can you give specific examples?**

**Al-Zayani:** Our main security challenges can be summed up as:

- Globally: Threats from international terrorism and serious organized crime (including cyber and narcotics).
- Regionally: The challenges of which your readers will be only too aware: Daesh and linked to this, extremism and the radicalization of some of our citizens; the unstable situation in some countries particularly Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya; Iranian interferences in the internal affairs of GCC member states as well as other Arab states, and manipulation of sectarianism to further its own ambitions; and last, but not least, the stalemate in the Middle East Peace Process.
- Internally: The processes of political change.

In addition to these, changes are taking place on the international level and within the Middle East. The major consequence of this is that the GCC as a whole must be prepared to act on its own or ideally form a wider coalition with regional allies. Our strategic collaboration with our international allies remains indispensable.

In terms of responding to these challenges, our member states play an important role in all aspects of cooperation and coordination of activities between ourselves and with our regional and international allies. Some specific examples of which are:

- Saudi Arabia's recent funding of a United Nations center for countering terrorism. This will act as a much needed international focal point, which in addition to its more operational roles, I hope will act as a center for research, exchange of knowledge, and coordination of efforts into disrupting the whole process of global radicalization. No such focal point currently exists.
- In addition, our nations play an active role within the international coalition that is fighting Daesh.
- We also participate in the whole spectrum of diplomacy and funding activities that hopefully will enhance the way to global and regional stability. In this respect our funds contribute massively to relieving the huge humanitarian challenges that have arisen.

## IV. Interviews

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- As you are aware, the GCC states together with regional allies are working as a coalition on operations to restore Yemen's legitimate government.
- Importantly, in terms of internal challenges, each of our nations is very aware of the aspirations of their citizens and other human factors which can cause instability. At the top of this is the priority we give to our youth. Here the GCC Supreme Council has directed the emplacement of programs and initiatives which will improve employment prospects and enable other activities to take place. This will make better use of leisure time, improve their transition from school to adulthood, prepare them for the challenges of economic diversification, and also very importantly, we hope, go some way to neutralize the effects of radicalization.

With regard to the Middle East Peace Process, this is a cause of huge discontent and a solution must be found. The GCC supports any strategy that leads to a two-state solution. Although this appears a long way from fruition, we must remember that if a nuclear deal can be agreed with Iran by the 5+1 powers, despite the antagonism of Israel and the skepticism of many Arab nations, the same political will and sense of priority should be able to ease the current deadlock.

**Gulf Affairs: In 2008, the GCC instituted the High Level Strategic Dialogue with Turkey. What are the shared Turkey-GCC security concerns and how are they cooperating on them?**

**Al-Zayani:** As a member of NATO and the G20, Turkey is an important regional and global power. It is a major player in the regional balance of power. We share with Turkey multiple interests and a rich heritage. Our relationship has grown immensely during the last decade and we look forward to strengthening it further for the benefit of our peoples. During the course of our strategic dialogue, we have concluded three rounds, covering a wide range of topics such as politics, commerce, culture, etc. Our positions on the Syrian crisis are almost identical and we share an interest in reaching a political settlement that meets the aspirations of the brotherly Syrian people. On the economic level, our trade has been increasing steadily and has a potential of further growth.

**Gulf Affairs: The GCC recently announced a coordination center for maritime security and a joint police force. What is the progress of these initiatives and how will they contribute to the collective security of the GCC region?**

**Al-Zayani:** This question is linked to my answer to your first question. I mentioned that our leaders had directed that the GCC should have institutions, systems and mechanisms in place to enhance all forms of cooperation, coordination and communication between our security forces. The maritime center and closer police cooperation are a follow-up to those directions. I think it would be useful to list such initiatives:

- The establishment of a GCC Unified Headquarters. This will ensure that all operations and preparation for operations are carried out in a manner that aligns national policies to GCC policy, and supports the action of GCC nations when they operate as an alliance. Responsibilities will include command and control, training, doctrine, communications, and logistics amongst others.
- Strengthening of GCC Joint capabilities in areas such as maritime activity coordination; regional integrated air and missile defense system; consideration of a joint response to Chemical Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) threats and others.

- Improving the state of readiness and capabilities of the GCC's Joint Reaction Force: the Peninsular Shield Force.
- Establishing a GCC Academy with the aim of training senior officers and government officials as well as selected individuals from the private sector to consider and prepare for all major threats facing the GCC member states. The Academy will improve the GCC's resilience as well as foster closer cooperation and trust between member states as well as other friendly nations which will be invited to send representatives.
- Establish a GCCPOL which will boost the GCC fight against serious organized crime (including cyber and narcotics), and enhance international counter-terrorist cooperation and coordination.
- All the above will be underpinned by the recently established GCC Emergency Management Center, which has the primary role of identifying and prioritizing the most serious threats and hazards facing the GCC member states. Once identified and documented in the "GCC Risk Register", the center becomes the focal point for ensuring that prevention measures are taken and preparations are made in the form of contingency plans which will complement national preparations.

I hope that readers will agree that these measures will not only enhance our preparations considerably, but will be the backbone to our claim that we will be able to respond appropriately to an attack or threat on any GCC member state, which by the GCC constitution is considered an attack or threat on all.

### **Gulf Affairs: How does the GCC view the nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the Western powers? What is the GCC strategy for dealing with this concern?**

**Al-Zayani:** You mean the P5+1-Iran Agreement concluded on July 2015. The first thing I would like to say is that the GCC has welcomed the agreement as this hopefully brings us one stage closer to a region free of weapons of mass destruction. What is critically important is that Iran fulfills its obligations accurately and in good faith. We also acknowledge and support Iran's right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Also we wonder, if Iran fails to comply with the requirements it has undertaken under the terms of the nuclear agreement, will sanctions be "snapped back" promptly? Or, will there be a certain reluctance to do so by the international community due to vested interests and the benefits of newly developed trading links? There are many questions that remain unanswered that only time will reveal; however, the nations that signed the agreement are morally bound to stand up to Iran in the event that it defaults.

Our issues with Iran are not only confined to its nuclear program but extend to what we see as its ongoing interference in the domestic affairs of GCC member states as well as regional nations and its selective support for terrorism. We hope that when it receives a multi-billion dollar windfall following the end of sanctions, that it will use its newfound wealth for the benefit of its people. If so, it will have our full approval for we wholeheartedly support the aspiration of Iranians to become more prosperous. What we will resist, of course, is any use of the funds to continue and possibly increase further mischief and interference in our societies.

## IV. Interviews

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We sincerely hope that Iran uses any newfound wealth for the benefit of its people and the region, but our skepticism is founded on facts such as these. You ask what our strategy is for dealing with these concerns. Quite simply we will wait and see what happens. We will assist, cooperate and encourage in any way we can—hoping for the best, while at the same time, united with our friends, being prepared for the worst.

In addition to its proxy adventures around the region, there is one issue which causes concern and perhaps better than any other illustrates Iran's contempt for international law—namely its continued illegal occupation of the three strategically located islands, which belong to the UAE and were seized by force in 1971. Despite all efforts to end the conflict peacefully, diplomatically and legally, including the UAE's willingness to submit to and be bound by a judgment rendered by the International Court of Justice at The Hague, we are no further forward. Instead, Iran has fortified the islands.

**Gulf Affairs: Over the past few years, some innovative ideas, such as the possible accession of Jordan and Morocco to the GCC as well as a possible transition to a full political union, have been proposed. What do you believe will be the next innovative development for the GCC in the coming years?**

**Al-Zayani:** We in the GCC work tirelessly to maintain our organization, resilience, stability and prosperity. We have succeeded in transforming our societies, in one generation, from a state of poverty, illiteracy and backwardness to modernity. We believe that our developmental achievements are linked intrinsically to our integration within the international economic system. We will continue to modernize our economies and strengthen our integration within the global economies sparing no efforts to equip our citizens in general, and our youth in particular with what it takes to become responsible global citizens. In short, we will continue to explore all avenues which lead to our vision of increased prosperity for all.

**Gulf Affairs: The GCC is often compared (unfavorably) to the European Union and many GCC initiatives have failed to be fully realized (the monetary union, for instance). How is the GCC as a collective political, security and economic body still relevant to the region today and does it foresee a stronger role similar to that of the EU in Europe?**

**Al-Zayani:** I do not agree with the statement that the GCC is “often compared (unfavorably) to the European Union and many GCC initiatives have failed to be fully realized (the monetary union, for instance)”! I believe the two blocks have many similarities and an equal amount of differences. To say that we have failed because we have not matched the EU in terms of monetary union, I would say was actually a success (!) when we consider the problems that the EU is undergoing on that particular issue. I feel if anything, that our policy of taking every step in a measured and calculated fashion is the right approach. It has given us the flexibility to test changes before we are committed, and has enabled us to learn from the successes, the complexities and the failures of others.

We are happy with the way we are proceeding and I believe that as a bloc, we are extremely relevant in the region as a collective political, security and economic body.

- “Politically,” as in security, our leaders speak with one voice on all major issues and find in each other a sustaining strength which enables us to meet the many and varied challenges we encounter. Indeed we consider ourselves as a “Rock of Stability”, around which the regional turbulence flows.

- With regard to “Security,” you will have seen from my answers how much we depend on each other and how this interdependence is underpinned by our tangible joint arrangements. Our member states, together with like-minded nations, are doing much to restore stability and improve resilience within the region. As we look to the future, our collective strength will be a force with the potential to ensure that stability is sustained.
- “Economically,” all our member states have their own plans for creating and sustaining wealth. Nevertheless as a bloc we are pursuing initiatives such as integrated energy grids, a trans-GCC railway and sharing of water, all of which will add additional flexibility and security to our infrastructure. These together with encouraging an ethos of economic innovation, internal investment and providing for easier cross flow of labor and closer customs integration make our relevance all too obvious.

None of this, surely, points to political, security or economic weakness or irrelevance. With regard to the future and further integration, we shall continue to be balanced in our approach; we will follow our instincts and above all the wishes of our citizens.