

THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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On March 11 the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized that the proliferation of COVID-19 had reached the scale of a pandemic. From its beginning in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic migrated to Europe, then to the United States, finally reaching Latin America. Due to the social and economic impact caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, a range of political reactions was demanded globally in several spheres - local, national, regional, and international. The regional dimension is particularly interesting in the sense of unveiling how States act against a threat that is essentially transnational, whose responses, in thesis, would require from these actors some degree of joint coordination and cooperative dialogue.

Thus, our objective here is to analyze how the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of Gulf – or just the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – initially reacted to the pandemic of COVID-19. A first point to highlight is that, unlike what occurs in other regional organizations, such as the European Union and Mercosur, for example, there is still little attention to the Middle East from specialists in the field of regionalism. In current studies on regionalism and the pandemic, the apparent gap in relation to the Persian Gulf should not suggest the lack of challenges and political responses in this unique regional system.

First of all, we introduce some aspects of the GCC in order to highlight its values, goals and strategic perspective. The GCC is an economic bloc, inserted in a perspective of political-strategic union and defensive alliance (CARVALHO PINTO, 2012), which was established in 1981 by the six signatory states of the Middle East, namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. The GCC aims to

foster Arab unity through a process of coordination, integration, and interconnection between its member states in areas such as economy and finance, trade, education and culture, health, tourism, and legislation (GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020a). Grounded on a strong military bias, the GCC was driven by the need to provide greater cohesion and cooperation between these countries in order to preserve their status quo regarding the historical distrust generated by the Iranian hegemonic aspirations found since before the Islamic revolution of 1979 (CARVALHO PINTO, 2012; BROCKER, 2016).

These countries have gone through political and economic processes intertwined by a common identity, which is linked both to the fact that they are constituted of monarchical regimes and to the enormous potential of the oil sector. Despite the synergies in the economic-commercial agenda, the cooperation of States was based on the individual's potentialities related to such actors (COSTA, 2014), driven by the typical period of reorganization of the international order in the post-Cold War, in which the strategies of international insertion and integration were at the top of the global agenda.

In September 2020, at the time this work is being written, almost seven months since the pandemic started officially, the health crisis reaches significant marks: 33,881,272 cases and 1,012,980 deaths around the world, while in the six countries of the GCC there is a total of 829,186 cases and 7,197 lives taken by COVID-19. This is a number of deaths significantly lower than South Africa, for example, that presents 676,084 cases and 16,866 deaths from COVID-19 with a population (58,775,022 inhabitants) which is similar to the set of countries in the GCC (58,660,220 inhabitants) (JOHN HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, 2020). It's important to mention that the testing capacity and the veracity of official statistics can be widely questioned in both cases. The relatively low proportion of GCC fatal and infected cases in the global panorama has been related to the effectiveness of the fast government responses and the structural superiority of the health system in these countries (MARTÍNEZ, 2020).

The arrival of the pandemic in the region occurred in a scenario that had been marked by instabilities resulting from a combination of factors, such as the regional embargo against Qatar in 2017, that opened an unprecedented fracture in the bloc; the escalation of tensions in the Middle East, catalyzed by the conflict between the United States and Iran in 2019, and the trade war between the major oil producers Russia and

Saudi Arabia which is associated with the decline of oil demand and the fall of the barrels prices in the global market. Despite these fragilities, the pandemic has offered an opportunity to revitalize the GCC as a regional instance capable of offering institutional responses and generating opportunities for diplomatic rapprochement with Syria and Iran, one of the Arab countries most impacted by the health crisis (FAKHRO, 2020).

The first case of Coronavirus contagion officially registered in GCC member countries occurred in the United Arab Emirates on January 29. The data in Table 1 below, on the first records of cases and deaths from Coronavirus in the Gulf countries, suggest a more or less cohesive profile among the Gulf countries regarding the initial moments of viral proliferation. An important aspect from the beginning of the pandemic is that the governments of the six countries recognized the seriousness of the viral proliferation and aimed to adopt all measures in line with international health regulations, specifically the WHO International Health Regulation (2005) and the CCG Unified Health Procedures Manual (2018) (GCC..., 2020a).

Since then, the governments have adopted a set of measures to contain the virus, such as restrictions on mobility, circulation, and international commercial flights, the suspension of classes and prayers in mosques, the closure of public spaces, non-essential businesses and borders, and lockdown practices (MARTÍNEZ, 2020).

In the face of the new common threat represented by the pandemic, one can identify initiatives that revitalized the intergovernmental points of contact in the GCC. In the period of analysis (March-September 2020), there was a series of technical meetings, workshops, and seminars organized by the GCC General Secretariat involving the COVID-19 agenda specifically as well as the planning of measures for the current and post-pandemic panorama (Table 2). At first, in March, the main joint efforts for coordination were centered on the Health Ministers of those countries. The practical result was the creation of a 'joint operations room' that aims to bring these authorities together in weekly meetings to update and share information and experiences, as well as discussions on the coordination of the next steps (GCC..., 2020b).

Since June we can verify more notably a process of variation in how the theme is treated in the GCC discussions, which is marked by a strongly multisectoral perspective that included sectors like tourism, education, water and energy, food, telecommunications, road transport, civil aviation, ports and maritime transport, sports,

Table 1 - Impact of the pandemic by countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (2020)

	Saudi Arabia	Bahrain	United Arab Emirates	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar
Population	34,709,954	1,870,601	9,870,325	4,257,439	5,081,300	2,870,601
N. of cases*	334,605	70,864	94,190	105,182	98,585	125,760
N. of deaths*	4,768	251	419	610	935	214
1° case	March 2	February 24	January 29	February 24	February 24	February 29
1° death	March 24	March 16	March 21	April 4	April 1	March 30

Fonte: the author, based on John Hopkins University (2020) and Martínez (2020).

public administration at the municipal level, micro and small companies (GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020b).

In the same month, the Secretary-General of the GCC, Nayef Al Hajraf, convened a virtual meeting between the finance ministers of the six members to coordinate common measures against the effects of the crisis (SALAMANCA, 2020). The ministers also reaffirmed the importance of a coordinated and joint strategy in all sectors in order to support the economic recovery and agreed on the necessity to facilitate the circulation of goods, especially foods and basic necessities, between countries from the GCC (QATAR, 2020a).

In April, trade representatives from the six member countries accepted the Kuwaiti proposal to create a common food supply network (MARTÍNEZ, 2020). In this respect, it is worth considering that mechanisms aimed to guarantee internal stability become an even more important asset for the monarchic regimes in the Middle East, which are often confronted by the fear of a wave of protests and revolutionary demonstrations for the expansion of civil and political rights and better conditions of work (CARVALHO PINTO, 2012).

Consequently, the resilience of the health system in these countries has been identified as one of the main factors of success in facing the pandemic. According to Martínez (2020), there are some factors that help to understand this picture. Firstly, the superiority of the CCG's infrastructure and health services compared to other countries

in the Middle East, something that is internationally recognized by the WHO. Second, the precedent epidemic in the region in 2012, named Middle East Respiratory Syndrome

Table 2 - GCC institutional responses for managing the COVID-19 crisis by thematic areas (until September 2020)

Thematic Area	Actions
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GCC Meeting on Communicable Diseases Committee for Coordination and Cooperation (January, 29) - Three Extraordinary Meetings of the GCC Committee of Ministers of Health on the COVID-19 (February 19; March 21; June 17); - The GCC Health Cities Committee Meeting on COVID-19 (April 9); - The 3rd Joint Meeting of the Working Group to follow up the Work Plan of the GCC Ministerial Committee for Health (July 15).
Transit and transportation (road, air, sea)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GCC Technical Committee for Transportation and Road Engineering Meeting (May 7); - Discussing the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic's on the GCC Ports and Maritime Transportation Sector (May 12); - Discussing the Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic's on the GCC Ports and Maritime Transport Sector (June 15); - The GCC 1st Meeting to follow up on the progression of the Coronavirus Dissemination and its Impact on the GCC Civil Aviation Sector (June 18); - The GCC and ERA Panel Discussion on "the Impact of the Corona Pandemic on the GCC Railway and Metro Sector and Similar International Experiences" (July 9).
Economics, Business and Investments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Session to discuss the Situation of the GCC Small and Medium Enterprises Post-COVID-19 (May 18); - The GCC Panel Discussion on the "Priorities of Government Spending to address the Impacts of the Corona Pandemic" (July 13); - The GCC Workshop "Entrepreneurship and Investment in Digital Solutions in Light of keeping Pace with the Corona Pandemic" (July 19); - The GCC Seminar "Small and Medium Enterprises Post Covid-19" (July 22).
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in the "Quality of Higher Education under COVID 19" Forum (June 18); - The GCC Workshop on "Education during the Corona pandemic" (August 12).
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GCC Workshop "the Role of the GCC Telecommunication Technologies Sector in Facing and Recovering from the Corona Pandemic (COVID-19) and the Business Continuity Plans" (July 1).
Food, Water and Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GCC Workshop on "the Future of the GCC Renewable and New Energy and the Impact of the Corona Pandemic" (July 5); - The GCC Seminar on "the GCC Interconnection of Food, Water and Energy from an Economic Perspective in Light of the Corona Pandemic" (July 8); - The GCC 2nd Workshop on "the Impact of the Corona Pandemic on the Electricity and Water Sectors" (July 12).
Public Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GCC Workshop on "the Effects of the Corona Pandemic on the Municipal Work" (July 6).
Sport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GCC Workshop on "the Effects of the Corona Pandemic on the GCC Sports Sector" (July 7).
Tourism and Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The GCC Seminar on "the Repercussions of the Corona Pandemic on Tourism" (July 13); - The GCC Workshop on "the Impacts of the Corona Pandemic on the GCC Environment" (July 14).

Source: author's elaboration based on the Gulf Cooperation Council data (2020b)

Coronavirus (Mers-CoV), that affected mainly Saudi Arabia, allowed these countries to use their previous epidemiological experience to combat the current crisis. The last aspect pointed out by the author is related to the high financial capacity of the so-called 'petromonarchies' for confronting the current economic adversities - although the high dependence of the region on oil makes them more vulnerable to commodity fluctuations on the global market. Nevertheless, even though official figures indicate that the scale of the sanitary crisis is relatively softer in the Gulf, the economic impacts of the pandemic turned more acute the crisis perception.

In the economic dimension, the policy of closing non-essential businesses was generally adopted. However, there are cases of sectors that remained in operation such as construction, oil, and gas, which are also big employers of a large mass of workers. In this sense, the pandemic highlighted the social disparities that have been affecting many immigrant workers in the Gulf, a region that is traditionally known for attracting massive foreign flows from Africa and Asia to occupy underqualified posts in precarious conditions and not covered by the public health system (SALAMANCA, 2020). In Qatar, a country that has invested heavily in infrastructure to host the 2022 World Cup, there are reports that thousands of workers were locked up in a working-class neighborhood to prevent viral spread (MEDO..., 2020).

In the geopolitical dimension, a point that stands out is the potential for cooperation that the crisis of the novel Coronavirus has generated. The alarming economic and health situation in Iran, one of the countries most affected by the pandemic in the Middle East, motivated the GCC humanitarian aid: the Qatar government, an ally of the Islamic regime, announced the sending of medical teams and equipment; the government of the United Arab Emirates allocated two planes with medical and sanitary equipment; Kuwait, for its part, registered the sending of 10 million dollars. The exception is Saudi Arabia, a well-known opponent of the Iranian government and considered Washington's most important partner in the Gulf (ARANHA, 2020). On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates used the crisis context to advance its foreign policy interests on Syria by offering help to the government of Bashar Al-Assad, a gesture that has been considered as the first public contact by an Arab leadership since the beginning of the Syrian civil war (FAKHRO, 2020).

This rapprochement occurs just after the escalation of conflicts between Washington

and Tehran in 2019 and the recent conciliation between the United Arab Emirates and Israel, a fact that put the Iranian government in an even more delicate situation vis-à-vis the GCC countries. There is also another important piece on the political pandemic board. An opportunity for closer ties in the Gulf has been opened up by China, that offered support to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and also to Iran in fighting the pandemic. Thus, there are those who claim that this is the beginning of a 'geopolitical transformation' in the Gulf (KHAN, 2020).

On the other hand, political divergence occurred before the pandemic crisis demonstrates the limits of regional cooperation. At the start of the pandemic, the government of Qatar – which has broken diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain since 2017 – accused the Saudi government of politicizing the pandemic and hampering access to the Qatari Health minister at a meeting about technical measures to contain the virus that took place in Riyadh (QATAR, 2020b). Despite this, it is worth noting that the pandemic represented the return of Doha to the GCC discussions, which may result in a gradual resumption of diplomatic relations.

For all of the above, we can finally draw some conclusions regarding the effects of the pandemic on the GCC's regionalism:

- Considering the differences in capacity (population, economic, territorial) of these countries, we verified that the national governments responded somehow to the demands for stopping the spread of the Coronavirus and demonstrated the desire to do so in a multisectoral agenda through institutional forums and ministerial conversations. It is essential, therefore, a later and more detailed analysis of this process in order to evaluate the practical consequences of those measures;

- The pandemic served as a ground to oxygenate the GCC, which has been paralyzed since 2017, and to advance cooperation within and outside the bloc (with Iran and China and, in the case of the United Arab Emirates, Syria). However, the approximations took place under a strong and exceptional humanitarian argument. Thus, we believe that there is a low probability that this process will lead to other areas considered more strategic and that it would end up reaching into the imbricated geopolitics of the Middle East;

- One last and relevant aspect is that, just as elsewhere in the world, the exceptionality of political action caused by the pandemic has opened up space for

advancing authoritarian practices against political dissidents and human rights violations against the poorest like the immigrants within the Gulf countries.

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