

Departamento de Medio Oriente

Interview with the new GCC Secretary-General

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As GCC Secretary-General and the first Bahraini and first military man to take office, HE Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani hopes to usher political and social reform.

HE Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani is the first Bahraini and first military man to assume the office of Secretary-General for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which was established in 1981. Officially taking the role on April 1, he assumes office at a tumultuous time in the Middle East.

He sat down with the Gulf Research Center to talk about his views on the future of the Council and his priorities for the office, in an interview first published in Alriyadh newspaper.

This is a part of the translated transcript of the interview.

Q. There are many international, domestic and local challenges that face the GCC at the moment. What are your priorities with respect to these issues?

A. My priorities are those set by the leaders of the GCC states via their decrees in the Gulf Summits; the Cabinet's decrees; the agreements signed in the context of the GCC; and the GCC Charter. Perhaps I can summarise these priorities in five objectives:

- The first objective is to strengthen the joint, comprehensive defense and security of the member states of the GCC. (i.e. the security of member states individually and collectively, as well as the security of individual Gulf citizens)
- The second objective centers on the Gulf economy. The aim is to provide for a growing and cohesive economy in the framework of economic, technological and informational integration.
- The third objective concerns human development.

- The fourth objective is related to public safety by reinforcing the capabilities of fighting natural and human disasters and the ability to recover from them.
- The fifth objective involves furthering the international position of the member states of the GCC.

All of these objectives are based on the resolutions passed by the Gulf leaders over the past years. The Secretary-Generals who preceded me worked on achieving these objectives and I am keen on benefiting from their experiences, pursuing their approaches, and building on their achievements and accomplishments.

I will simultaneously widen the boundaries of these objectives and add new activities to them in response to the challenges and developments in the region in particular and the world in general.

Q. The Middle East region is witnessing widespread protests and calls for change and reform. How do you view this situation? And how do you interpret it?

A. This is an important question. I believe that the calls for reform and change are logical ones. Individuals and entire societies constantly work on developing themselves irrespective of the progress they may have already achieved. We see this, for example, in the developed countries of Europe and America. This is my first point.

The second point pertains to the status of youth in Arab societies in general and the Gulf societies in particular. Young people in the Gulf have experienced scientific and cultural progress and are more open to technology, satellite TV stations and what goes on in the world. It is only natural that they have been affected by these things.

The third point relates more to the GCC states, which are modern, young countries. The youth in these states is in the region of 50-60 percent of the total population. This poses a number of problems, including the absence of jobs for young people and a higher rate of unemployment among university graduates. The result is young people who seek political and economic participation and strive to effect cultural changes in their societies.

Finally, in analysing social and political activities from the perspective of psychology, there is what is called the phenomenon of "fashion imitation" as borrowed from the fashion world of costumes. Youth protest movements spread from one society to another under such a phenomenon.

As far as I am concerned, the Gulf societies, with the progress they have achieved in human development, are ready to undertake a new phase of political, social and cultural reform also given the fact that the GCC is a part of the globalised international system.

However, we should be wary of blindly imitating other societies. Every society has its own characteristics, history, heritage, and its social, demographic, religious and sectarian structure. We are still countries that have social realities, which are linked to tribes and clans. Hence, social change is slow, and undermining the stages of development can result in confusion in the political system. In short, we say that gradual reform is required whereas sudden, coup-like, or revolutionary change could plunge the region into catastrophic situations.

Q. The predicament of the Iranian nuclear issue and the UAE-Iran issue of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs constitute obstacles to developing further Gulf-Iranian relations. How can we settle pending issues with Iran? What other options are available to the GCC?

A. I think we need to put things in the right perspective in conformity to the Gulf principles of action and the principles of good neighbourliness. Here are six points:

- Firstly, Iran is a Muslim country and a neighbouring state to the GCC states and in this context there are questions concerning Iran's intentions towards the GCC and Iranian ambitions.
- Secondly, Gulf-Iran relations must be based on clear principles referred to in the Charter of the United Nations and several other international conventions. These consist of respecting state sovereignty and on the non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries.
- Thirdly, the GCC states are sovereign states and the sovereignty of each one of them must be preserved, as well as their national territories.
- Fourthly, the UAE has chosen a peaceful approach in its foreign relations and has opted for peaceful resolutions to its problems in the international arena; it has been supported in this regard by the GCC states and the Arab League.
- Fifthly, the UAE has offered proposals to resolve its dispute with the Islamic Republic of Iran peacefully.

· Sixthly, with regards the Iranian nuclear programme, Iran has the right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Iran's conflict with western countries and superpowers can be resolved via peaceful negotiations and reassuring the Arab Gulf countries about their safety and non-exposure to nuclear radiation and pollution of the Gulf waters.

Q. How do you assess joint Gulf action? And what are your aspirations for the future?

A. There can be no doubt that joint Gulf action has achieved several goals over the years. If we view it objectively, we will find a great amount of joint action, including the Gulf Common Market, the Al-Jazeera Shield force, defense and security strategies, equal rights for travel, labour and residence visas for Gulf citizens across the GCC States.

As for my ambitions, they consist of making every citizen feel that joint action benefits them, if this is achieved, citizens will support and reinforce joint action.

There is also the question of deepening and furthering the Gulf economic citizenship and the quest to reinforce the status of the Gulf countries in the international arena. In this context, Gulf action becomes a framework of comprehensive coordination and cooperation on all levels. It also achieves interconnection between member states in all fields in pursuit of unity. This has been stipulated by Article Four of the GCC Charter.

Q. Will the UAE refusal to join the currency union delay the emergence of this currency?

A. The common currency will be issued soon. Many of the administrative and organisational aspects have been dealt with and work is continuing to appoint teams and train them for their tasks.

However, I must refer to an important fact: joint action in the entire world progresses at different speeds and on multiple levels. The European experience is the best evidence of this. Not all European Union countries have joined the common European currency, the 'Euro'. Great Britain, as a superpower, has not joined the European common currency yet.

Q. The Gulf nuclear programme began individually in each country although it was originally declared under the umbrella of the GCC. How can the GCC states collectively benefit from this programme?

A. The Gulf nuclear programme has two dimensions to it: a common dimension and a country-specific one. The common dimension relates to the framework, guiding principles, and the studies carried out by the GCC and the Secretariat in collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The country-specific dimension concerns implementation and relates to nuclear plants in each country.

We should not forget that the Gulf nuclear programme is a peaceful power programme dedicated to peaceful purposes. Hence, it is characterised by transparency and it has an integral framework; when it is accomplished in each state, nuclear facilities will be interconnected just as in the case of the electricity grid.

Q. Do you endorse other countries joining the GCC? And what are the conditions governing new membership?

A. The Charter of the GCC did not include a provision on other countries joining the Council. Nevertheless, there has been movement and Yemen is now a member in several Gulf committees and activities. Perhaps the most significant of these activities was the remarkable 20th Gulf Football Cup which took place in Yemen. I am quite confident that the leaders of the GCC are keen on deepening relations with Yemen in several other fields. As for membership conditions, this is a legal question and requires more legal and political studies.

Q. Do you support unifying the educational curricula in the GCC states?

A. Yes. Developing the educational curricula is necessary, especially relating to scientific courses as these are of a general nature and provide general principles that constitute the pillar of progress. As for the social sciences curricula, each country has unique features that ought to be taken into consideration.

Q. What is the dream that you wish to come true during your term of office as the Secretary General of the GCC?

A. I have many and limitless dreams. They stem from the ambitions of the founding fathers of the GCC and the achievements of the leaders of the Council through the past three decades. These are boundless ambitions, but they operate in a framework of reality and an awareness of the current economic, social, cultural and political circumstances. Of these dreams, I am interested in highlighting three particular ones.

- First, reinforcing the educational and scientific structure to generate progress for GCC citizens to allow them to contribute to inventiveness and become producers of knowledge and not merely consumers.
- Second, deepening the comprehensive cooperation between the GCC states and institutions in the economic, social and cultural fields. This will make every Gulf citizen appreciate the need for common action and, hence, he will seek to maintain such common action and develop it further. As such, the move towards comprehensive cooperation will receive the necessary support.
- Third, building a solid and strong basis of regional strength and vitality, or what is called 'Regional Resilience' as a point of departure towards global horizons more spacious and prestigious to the GCC states. As I said earlier, they all revolve around the persistent pursuit of Gulf unity because the nations of the GCC countries are similar with regard to their origin, tribes, heritage, and political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances.

Q. Thank you for your time.

A. Your welcome.