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THE MONARCHIES OF THE PERSIAN GULF AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. The principal investigative goal of the present research is aimed at revealing the parameters and main directions of political and economic interaction between the Arabian monarchies and post-Soviet Central Asia (CA). The analysis takes into account the cardinal changes in the world system, where the formation of a polycentric world order is in full swing against the background of rejection of the monopolar model of world development. The place of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in this order is determined by their increased foreign policy ambitions, supported by super-profits from the sale of oil and gas. The article also addresses an important issue of perception of the wealthy Arabian monarchies and their regional association, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in Central Asia as a rather attractive foreign policy alternative. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf are currently intensifying their interaction with the Central Asian region, which offers them considerable opportunities in political, trade, and economic spheres. The interest of the Arabian monarchies, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, in Central Asia is also in line with their intentions to establish themselves as an independent geopolitical center. In turn, Central Asian countries hope to accelerate their economic modernization with the help of Arab investment and to broaden the horizons of international cooperation through interaction with the GCC. The Central Asian countries also do not give up hopes for the inflow of Arab investments, which are so essential to their development. In the context of growing geopolitical turbulence and a competitive environment, post-Soviet Central Asia opens up new horizons of international cooperation.

Keywords: Central Asia, Arabian monarchies, Gulf Cooperation Council, investment, geopolitics.

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АРАВИЙСКИЕ МОНАРХИИ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ

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Аннотация. Арабские государства Персидского залива в настоящее время активизируют взаимодействие с Центрально-Азиатским регионом, открывающим для них немалые возможности в политике и торгово-экономической сфере. Интерес к Центральной Азии лежит также в русле намерений аравийских монархий — членов Совета сотрудничества арабских государств Персидского залива (ССАГПЗ) утвердиться в качестве самостоятельного геополитического центра. Центральноазиатские страны рассчитывают ускорить с помощью арабских инвестиций экономическую модернизацию, расширить благодаря взаимодействию с ССАГПЗ горизонты международного сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, аравийские монархии, Совет сотрудничества арабских государств Персидского залива, инвестиции, геополитика.

INTRODUCTION

The main research goal of the article is to identify the parameters and main directions of political and economic interaction between the Arabian monarchies and post-Soviet Central Asia

(CA). This takes into account the changes that modern international relations are undergoing with regard to their rejection of the monopolar model of world development and the accelerating process of formation of the polycentric world order. The place of the Arab states of the Persian

Gulf in this order is determined by their increased claims for a new and more influential role in world politics. The article also considers such an important problem as the perception by the Central Asian countries of the rich Arabian monarchies and their regional association, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as a quite attractive foreign policy alternative. Given the growing geopolitical turbulence and the continuing competitive environment in Central Asia's "near abroad" countries, such an alternative opens up new horizons of international cooperation for the countries of this region and gives rise to hopes for an inflow of investments so much necessary for development.

The article focuses on the period of the 2020s when the GCC participants became noticeably more active in the international political arena, while the post-Soviet Central Asian Five did not abandon its attempts to form a collective foreign policy agenda on the intra-regional basis (see [1] for more details).

It should be noted that the problems of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf have been widely covered in a number of foreign and Russian orientalist studies, which turned to history for the most part. Naumkin's fundamental work holds an important place among them. He reveals little-known pages of the activity of Russian diplomats in the Kingdom of Hedjaz/Saudi Arabia in the 1920s-1930s [2]. The study by American scientist Starr [3] is also of interest for the subject of the present article: his book translated into Russian in 2017 and containing many references to the legacy of the great V.V. Bartold reveals new facets in the interpenetration of cultures in the Middle Ages — those of the Arabs and the peoples who then occupied the territory of modern CA.

The 2000s faced plenty of works in the Russian scientific corpus on the ongoing trends in the development of Arab monarchies (see, for instance, [4, 5, 6]), and on the activities of external players in CA — Russia, China, the EU, the USA, Turkey and others. An interesting study by Zvyagelskaya [7], who explored the influence of global trends on regional processes by the example of the Middle East and Central Asia, deserves attention in this regard. As for the penetration of the Arab

monarchies of the Persian Gulf into the political and economic sphere of the CA region, this problem remains still insufficiently studied; therefore, the present article is an attempt to fill such a gap.

Using mainly the method of content analysis to obtain reliable information about international policy realities of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and post-Soviet CA, the author critically analysed the media materials and Internet sources at her disposal, having introduced some of them into the scientific discourse for the first time. The author also took into account the analytical essays of Russian, Arab, Central Asian and Western experts on the problems of international relations in CA and the Persian Gulf.

THE EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL CENTRE IN THE PERSIAN GULF

The Arab countries of the Persian Gulf (excluding Iraq, where the American military occupation lasting since 2003 has triggered the process of state collapse according to the Balkan scenario and turned the territory of this country into an arena of confrontation of external forces [8, pp. 249-276]) occupy one of the leading positions in terms of economic growth, the scope of industrial export and investment potential. The GCC, a sub-regional association of the Persian Gulf, which mainly coordinates the members' trade and economic interaction, has been successfully operating since the mid-1980s. Initiated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the Council also includes Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The GCC's cementing factor is energy; its problems and issues are dealt with mainly at private meetings. Although there have been a number of attempts to extend the Council (two Middle Eastern kingdoms, Morocco and Jordan, expressed interest in joining it), considering that GCC summits often took place in an extended format, this regional and international organisation still remains a "Group of Six".

Energy production is still stably high in the Persian Gulf, which accounts for the global importance of the region. Politically, the GCC member states are authoritarian monarchical re-

gimes that sometimes enter into bitter differences and disputes [9, pp. 110-114]. All of them, despite occasional criticism of the West and divergent approaches to some international problems (Palestine in the first place), maintain close ties with the USA, especially in the military-political sphere: American military bases are located in a number of countries of the Persian Gulf. The role of the KSA as a key US ally in the Middle East has also been largely preserved since the Cold War.

The religious pattern in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf is quite complex. Qatar supports The Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation based in several Middle Eastern states; however, its activities (like those of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State¹) have been condemned by Saudi Arabia since the Arab Spring. The religious factor facilitates Qatar's strategic partnership with Turkey where the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) traces its origin from the Muslim Brotherhood. In Bahrain, two-thirds of the population are Shiah; however, the kingdom is governed by the adherents of the Sunni trend in Islam, which often leads to internal political confrontation condemned by Manama which usually blames Shi-ite Iran for fuelling, justifying it by the fact that the latter, having never come to terms with the loss of Bahrain under British colonial rule, continues to make territorial claims to the kingdom.

In Russia and a number of Central Asian states, the continuing wary attitude towards the Gulf monarchies is often due to the religious factor associated with the possibility of the introduction of Hanbalism borrowed from the Arabian Peninsula — a religious/legal school (*madhhab*) historically alien to the local Muslim tradition. Of no small importance for the perception of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE by Central Asian and Russian society is the fact that these countries have been financing and arming Sunni Islamist political movements in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria and sponsoring extremist groups in southern regions of the near abroad for many years. The militants in religious guise left a noticeable mark there during the armed conflict in Chechn-

¹ The Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are recognised as terrorist organisations in the Russian Federation and are banned.

ya in 1994–1996. The evolution of Saudi Arabia's policy, whereby it declared the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda the number one enemy of Islam in the 2000s, contributed to the normalisation of Russian-Saudi and Saudi-Central Asian interstate relations. The concerns about the potential religious threat previously emanating from Riyadh also weakened. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 2005, for instance, Russia supported the Saudi initiative in the UN to create an international centre for combating terrorism: the Kingdom (as well as in Russia) deems such structures as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Muslim Brotherhood and a number of others to be its proponents.

Prior to the Arab Spring, with the onset usually dated to 2010, the Arabian monarchies were generally unanimous on the issues of the global agenda. They used to coordinate their actions within the framework of the GCC, and their foreign policy rarely transcended this region and interests related to its energy problems [10, p. 180]. Much has changed since then, however, and the Gulf states — especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar — began to claim more significant roles in world politics.

This process is inseparable from the deepening political instability in the Middle East accompanied by occasional energy crises. The revitalisation of the countries of the Global South and East is also playing a certain role. Their aspirations, as noted at the Forum of Supporters of the Struggle against Modern Practices of Neocolonialism “For the Freedom of Nations!” held in Moscow on 16 February 2024, are often in conflict with the neocolonialist policies of globalist elites representing “the collective West” [source 1]. Prominent American scholars also give quite a notable assessment of the new situation in the world. According to them, “the international system is at a historical inflection point. As Asia continues its economic ascent, two centuries of Western domination of the world, first under *Pax Britannica* and then under *Pax Americana*, are coming to an end. The West is losing not only its material dominance but also its ideological sway” [11].

In these circumstances, the Gulf monarchies, relying on their substantial economic and energy potential, are trying to give greater geopolit-

ical significance to the region and their place in world politics. A comment by British researcher A. Krieg is noteworthy in this regard: “Gulf Arab states are also attempting to remake the region in their own image, prioritizing prosperity, stability, and development... Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have defied years of energy market turbulence, wars over narratives and the COVID-19 pandemic to emerge as new hubs of stability — not just in the region but also in the increasingly competitive multipolar world order. Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Riyadh are finding their place on the fault line between east and west as well as Global North and South. Importantly, they are doing so while setting aside their ideological and socio-political ambitions” [12].

The historical visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Riyadh in December 2022 and the subsequent agreement of March 2023 on the construction of two large industrial complexes in China’s Liaoning province by *Saudi Aramco*, Saudi Arabia’s national oil company [source 2], are among the events signalling the Gulf Arab monarchies’ more energetic entry onto the world stage.

Starting from 1 January 2024, Saudi Arabia which is also a member of the *G20* joined, together with the UAE the BRICS, the interstate informal association of countries with dynamically developing economies comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Iran and Ethiopia. With their participation in BRICS covering 40 per cent of the world’s population and accounting for 25 per cent of global GDP, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have an opportunity to diversify their trade relations beyond their traditional Western partners. As claimed by Shahid Hussain, CEO of UAE consultancy *Green Proposition*, “leveraging the technological innovation and manufacturing capabilities of BRICS members, particularly China, would accelerate Saudi Arabia’s growth in these sectors”, while “the tourism industry, fuelled by Saudi Arabia’s rich cultural heritage and natural resources, will also benefit from BRICS membership, attracting more visitors and generating employment opportunities” [13].

In 2023, in the efforts to transform its economic and political relations with other states,

Saudi Arabia was granted the “dialogue partner” status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which also includes Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Along with Azerbaijan, Nepal, Armenia, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, several Middle Eastern countries — Egypt, Turkey, Qatar and Bahrain — are also SCO dialogue partners. The consolidation of Saudi Arabia’s cooperation with the SCO came shortly after Riyadh announced a landmark reconciliation agreement with Iran: brokered by China, it provided for the resumption of diplomatic relations severed by the two countries in 2016.

The involvement of a number of Arabian monarchies in the work of associations reflecting mainly the interests of the Global Majority² testifies to the intention of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf not only to diversify their foreign policy contacts but also to fill them with new content determined by the formula of “turning to the East”. Like Russia, this approach is taking shape in the conditions when the centre of geo-economic gravity in the world is shifting away from the West. It is there, in the vast expanse of Eurasia, that the large and small Arab states of the Persian Gulf have significant opportunities both for investing capital in the *trade and economic sphere and power engineering* and for establishing themselves *as an independent centre influencing global processes*.

MUTUAL ATTRACTION DRIVERS

Although the Persian Gulf and Central Asia are geographically distant from each other, a number of factors have contributed to the two regions’ mutual attraction. Memories of the historical ties between the Islamic Caliphate (7th-9th centuries) and Maverranahr (the former name of the historical/geographical region of Central Asia) and the routes that ran through the Great Silk Road at that time played a significant role. The idea of a common religious identity with the peoples of Central Asia began to be discussed in the Arab

² The Global Majority, according to the accepted definition, is “a community of non-Western countries that have no binding relationships with the United States and the organisations it patronises” [source 3, p. 5].

world immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The religious factor was also taken into account in the concepts of a number of American experts who justified the need to detach post-Soviet Central Asia from Russia and the Russian world and connect it to the pro-Western geopolitical construct of the Greater Middle East [14].

However, it is not only history, religion and external forces that brought the Arab states of the Persian Gulf closer to Central Asia. Their interest in the Central Asian Five is to a large extent determined by its geographical location — its contiguity with Russia, on the one side, and China, on the other side. In general, the Central Asian region, which occupies a favourable strategic position, serves as a kind of “bridge” connecting Europe with Asia. CA represents also an intersection of trade and transport routes and a natural “storehouse” of strategic raw materials, including uranium and rare-earth metals. Central Asian countries, moreover, are a key asset not only for China’s Belt and Road Initiative but also for Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union. GCC participants have been looking closely at both of these projects for a long time.

The political factor also matters. Saudi Arabia, heading for Central Asia, as well as some other GCC participants, takes into account the continuing influence of the rival power — the Islamic Republic of Iran — in the region. It established historical, cultural and political ties with Central Asian countries much earlier than the Arabian monarchies, having shown due interest as well in expanding its economic presence. Particularly, after signing the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in August 2018, Tehran took a closer look at investment opportunities specific to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Apart from Iran, the Arabian monarchies may face serious competition from Turkey in CA. There are also reasons to assume the possible emergence of rivalry between the Arabian centres of power — the KSA, Qatar and the UAE.

As for the Central Asian republics’ interest in rapid intensification of cooperation with their new Middle Eastern partners, their enthusiasm has a certain explanation. First, the Central Asian countries hope to accelerate the modernisation

of their economies with the help of Arab investments. Second, they assume that the Gulf monarchies, perceived in the region solely as trade and economic partners, will not behave like Europeans and Americans imposing their political strategies and interfering in the internal affairs of CA states. Finally, the rich Arabian oil exporters are viewed by Central Asian ruling elites as an alternative and a kind of counterweight to other influential external powers — Russia, China, the EU, the US and Turkey.

The marked mutual aspiration of the Arabian monarchies and Central Asian republics to promote interregional economic cooperation, expand investment opportunities, strengthen security relations and develop humanitarian ties gained a decisive momentum at the GCC+CA summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 19 July 2023.

This first summit was attended by the Heads and Prime Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the UAE and the Presidents of five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). The Joint Action Plan adopted by the summit participants aims to strengthen the political dialogue and economic cooperation in 2023–2027. The participants agreed on setting up the Chamber of Commerce of Central Asian and Arab Gulf States. The proposal of the Turkmen side to hold the first investment forum GCC–Central Asia in Ashgabat in 2024 was also approved. The parties supported a proposal to organise a Medical Congress of Central Asia and GCC countries in Ashgabat not later than 2025, as well as the first sports competitions.

The Jeddah summit, with the next meeting scheduled for 2025 in Samarkand, demonstrates the Arabian monarchies’ desire to develop a collective approach to interaction with CA countries within the framework of the GCC. This makes their current course different from the past years when individual projects in CA were implemented by the Gulf states independently of each other.

Notably, the final document adopted by the summit accentuated the religious commonality of the five Central Asian countries and six GCC participants: “The countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and

the countries of Central Asia (C5) (the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan) bring together common bonds as they are Islamic countries, which are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and among them are values joint historical ties". The reference to the fact that both groups of countries have large oil and gas reserves supported the idea that this "qualifies it to play an influential role in global energy security." The participants expressed their hope for the perspective of building a "strategic partnership" between CA and the GCC, which, as noted in the document, "enhance cooperation and coordination in areas of common interest, strengthen bridges of communication and work to seize opportunities and develop coordination and cooperation mechanisms" [source 4].

Further developments have shown that the Gulf Arab states' cooperation with CA, albeit much more modest compared to the Central Asian Five's collaboration with other external partners (Russia, China, the EU, Turkey, etc.), is gaining momentum, although mainly in the economic sphere.

AREAS OF INTERACTION

According to some data, the scope of GCC investments (including commercial ones) in Central Asia in 2010–2022 increased by almost a third, and the volume of exports — by more than a third [15]. Oman, located at the junction of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, takes part in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project initiated by Russia, with members including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, India, Iran and Azerbaijan. The UAE, Qatar and Kuwait are increasingly interested in participating in this project. It is also important that the possible appearance of these Arab countries in this project, where Iran plays one of the key roles, can significantly facilitate the normalisation of their relations with the Islamic Republic.

Ranking the Arabian monarchies' interests in Central Asia by country, one can find that Kazakhstan is primarily their focus. This is not surprising, given the key role played by this state bor-

dering on Russia and China in most of the large commercial, economic and logistics projects implemented in the region.

Saudi Arabia, which was one of the first countries to recognise the independence of Kazakhstan, is deeply involved in economic cooperation with this Central Asian republic. Saudi Arabia's Minister of Investment Khalid A. Al-Falih, who visited Kazakhstan in 2021 and announced that the kingdom had invested about \$100 million in this country, noted an important feature that could help to bring the two countries closer: Saudi Arabia's state development programme until 2030 "Vision 2030" [source 5] and the strategic development plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2050 [source 6] are aimed at achieving several similar goals — diversification of economy and reduction of dependence on export of natural resources. Such objectives may lay a foundation for the subsequent development of Kazakh-Saudi cooperation in such areas as nuclear energy and renewable resources (land, solar, wind and water resources) [source 7].

Kazakhstan expects an inflow of additional investment from the Persian Gulf countries — in power engineering, geological exploration, and expansion of the Caspian Sea port infrastructure. Some practical results of cooperation are already evident. In particular, the sovereign fund *Mubadala*, the main investment mechanism in the UAE, has invested money in a coal plant and a chemical complex in Kazakhstan. The Dubai-based company *DP World* helped the republic to build transshipment complexes in the Caspian port of Aktau and took part in the improvement of the Khorgos special economic zone located on the border of Kazakhstan and China [16].

Kazakhstan's diplomatic contacts with the Arabian monarchies are developing dynamically. In February 2024, Kazakh President K.-J. Tokayev paid a state visit to Qatar. A few months before that, he met a delegation of the Qatari company *Power International Holding* in Astana to discuss the cooperation prospects in the sphere of power engineering, geological exploration, agriculture, and public health [source 8].

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE show increasing interest in investing in Uzbekistan's

economy. On 27 November 2023, a Saudi delegation led by the Kingdom's Minister of Investment, Khalid A. Al-Falih, visited Uzbekistan. The parties discussed the expansion of bilateral cooperation in various spheres and agreed on the realisation of projects in chemistry, power engineering, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, information technologies and infrastructural development. An agreement on the promotion of new programmes worth a total of \$11 billion in the sphere of transport infrastructure, public utilities, higher education, labour migration, geology, irrigation, and household waste treatment was also reached. The Saudi company *ACWA Power*, which has played a prominent role in the development of "green" energy in Uzbekistan, is currently implementing projects worth \$7.5 billion in Uzbekistan [17].

In recent years, Uzbekistan has markedly intensified contacts with Qatar, which is considered in the Islamic world to be a proponent of Western interests. The countries reciprocally opened their embassies in the spring of 2023, after which the leaders met repeatedly in Tashkent and Doha. In early October 2023, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid an official visit to Qatar where he held several meetings with head executives of major companies. The visit to the republic of a representative delegation of the major Qatari company *The Power International* operating in the field of hospitality, agriculture, construction, etc., which took place on 23 November 2023, is evidence of the success of the negotiations held by the Uzbekistan leader. A cattle-breeding cluster is currently being built in the Jizzakh region in partnership with this holding; this project is expected to become the largest agro-industrial complex in the region. The holding's investments in Uzbekistan's touristic sector, construction of hotels in the country's historical cities, and transport logistics, as well as the projects to create an international all-season theme park in the Tashkent region, are also planned.

In general, Uzbekistan is interested in investments from Qatar and other GCC participants, counting politically also on balancing the presence of China and other external players in the re-

public. Time will tell to what extent such hopes will be justified.

As for the other three CA countries, the Arabian monarchies' ties with them were limited for a long time.

As concerns Turkmenistan, this was due to its internationally recognised neutral status and the republic's traditional strict dosage of external contacts. In its interaction with the Arabian monarchies, official Ashgabat made exceptions only for energy and transport logistics issues. In particular, in March 2017, the then-president of Turkmenistan, G. Berdimuhamedov, offered the *Qatar Investment Authority (QIA)*, a sovereign wealth fund of the emirate, a stake in the exploration, production and development of Caspian offshore natural gas fields. Turkmenistan also applied to *QIA* for financial support for the TAPI (Turkmenistan — Afghanistan — Pakistan — India) gas pipeline project, which has been experiencing financial difficulties since its official opening in December 2015. Turkmenistan's state-run gas concern *Turkmengaz* also invited the largest Emirati holding company *Mubadala* and Kuwait's state oil corporation to participate in the financing of the TAPI gas pipeline, applying to these companies during Berdimuhamedov's visit to the UAE and Kuwait in March 2018 [18].

However, the growth of Arab capital investments in the republic takes a rather cautious and slow course. Turkmenistan has made an exception for the Emirati company *Dragon Oil* which is investing in the construction of oil reservoirs, as well as in oil and gas production in the section of the Caspian Sea owned by Turkmenistan. In fact, it is the only foreign company exporting Turkmen oil. Saudi Arabia, although sponsoring the Turkmen section of the TAPI pipeline that will carry Turkmen gas to India, so far hesitates to expand its involvement in the project because, passing via unstable Afghanistan and Pakistan, it faces security obstacles.

The contacts of the Arabian monarchies with Tajikistan used to be inactive largely due to the consequences of the lengthy civil war in the republic. The cautious attitude of the official Dushanbe towards Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE was also of certain importance. These states were

perceived by Tajikistan — *inter alia* with an eye on the experience of Afghanistan and the Russian North Caucasus — as proponents and sponsors of religious extremist movements. Moreover, for a long time, Tajikistan maintained close relations with Iran, a traditional rival and competitor of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, which have serious disagreements of religious character and unresolved territorial disputes with Shiite Iran.

In recent years, Tajikistan has been showing interest in diversifying its trade partners and attracting foreign investment aimed to support national infrastructure projects and improve socio-economic standards. In this regard, the attention of Tajikistan, which has significant hydropower resources, is attracted by the Qatari experience in the construction of wind-powered and solar electric plants.

In February 2023, Prime Minister of the Republic of Tajikistan, Kokhir Rasulzoda, met Qatar's Minister of Labour Dr Ali bin Samikh Al Marri. The parties discussed the issues of bilateral and multilateral intergovernmental cooperation, including the spheres of industry, investments, private sector, economy, trade and tourism. Rasulzoda and Al Marri emphasised that taking full advantage of the existing opportunities for the development of intergovernmental relations, especially in economy, investment and trade, “may contribute to strengthening and expansion of the bilateral and multilateral relations between the states” [19]. Tajikistan's steps to develop ties with Qatar and other Gulf monarchies are consistent with their general strategy towards expanding trade, and economic and financial presence in CA by investing in regional projects and supporting local governments.

As for Kyrgyzstan, the factor constraining the development of the relations with the GCC states is the republic's permanent instability characterised by regular violent change of ruling elites indulgently referred to by Western political strategists as “colour revolutions”.

CONCLUSION

The extent of the Arabian monarchies' economic linkage not only with Kyrgyzstan but also

with other CA countries is currently quite unassuming. According to the data cited by Russian researcher Zinin, the volume of bilateral trade between CA and GCC in 2021 was equal to \$3.1 billion. This amount accounts only for 0.27% of the total foreign trade of the GCC countries exceeding \$1 trillion [20].

This is largely because investors from the Gulf monarchies are usually reluctant to invest in hydrocarbon-rich countries, namely, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. On the one hand, the latter are competitors of Arab gas and oil producers. On the other hand, the fluctuations in prices for these energy resources, as well as the ease with which their supply routes can be disrupted, challenge the economic feasibility of large-scale investments. One should not as well discount the opposition (most likely, tacit) that Russia, China, Turkey and Iran can demonstrate to the Persian Gulf monarchies in CA. These states, which have long established themselves in Central Asia and have a significant influence on the political, economic and military dynamics of the region, are not likely to be interested in competition coming from the new players represented by the Gulf states.

However, there exist some circumstances that may alarm the Central Asian republics and force them to place restrictions on their deepening contacts with the Arabian monarchies. These concerns are primarily related to the fact that the secular political systems of CA run risks of being exposed, along with Arab investments (often gratuitous), to mass-scale religious propaganda from the Qatar-backed organisations banned in CA and Russia — The Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Salafi and others. In addition, the influential international television company Al-Jazeera headquartered in Doha, the capital of Qatar, can become, on a par with Western non-profit organisations and mass media based in CA, a factor destabilising regional political systems and spreading ideas alien to the secular political culture of the Central Asian republics.

Thus, the GCC members so far cannot yet conclude that they have filled a significant niche in Central Asia. Given the competitive environment in CA, there is also reason to believe that

the region will become a scene of rivalry between the Arabian centres of power, Iran and Turkey. Disputes over sales markets may arise between the Middle Eastern players themselves. In particular, not only Turkey and Iran but also the UAE and Qatar are serious competitors of Saudi Arabia in Central Asia. The possibility of struggle for influence in this area between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar cannot be excluded as well. The Islamic Republic of Iran can play its part in this scenario, especially in Tajikistan where Tehran uses its linguistic commonality (Persian language) with this republic and, accordingly, the ethnocultural factor, with a view to entrenching itself. Iran, owing to its geographic proximity to CA, also has a better chance than the Arabian monarchies since it offers itself as a logistic hub for the energy sector and trade corridors.

Nevertheless, the key countries of the Persian Gulf — Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar — are brought closer to their Central Asian partners owing to the fact that all of them seek to defend their national interests by diversifying international relations. They also treat such “multi-vector” diversity in foreign policy as a way to ensure their own security in the factual situation of global turmoil which accompanies the current transition from the unipolar world to its polycentric option. Anyway, the involvement of Central Asian and Persian Gulf states in the formation of the common Eurasian political and economic space can be viewed as a quite positive phenomenon. This is compliant with the EAEU’s (Eurasian Economic Union) integration priorities and the aspirations towards more profound cooperation within the framework of the SCO and BRICS.

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