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## Wary of Mursi, Gulf Arabs keen to appear neutral in Egypt crisis



Gulf Arab rulers are resisting the temptation to gloat in public about the political woes of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, a group most of them mistrust, for fear of deepening unrest in a country that remains a potential ally in their standoff with Iran. Officials and analysts said official Gulf Arab silence reflected a longstanding belief among the mainly small, U.S.-allied Sunni Muslim-ruled oil producers that their security is closely linked to that of Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab World, which is also Sunni. For most of the past 30 years Egypt has been a strategic ally for Gulf Arab states worried about being dominated by the much bigger, Shi'ite Muslim Islamic Republic across the Gulf. Now, with the stakes so high and Egypt's situation so volatile, the official thinking seems to be that public meddling might only make things worse, analysts say. Expressions of concern are couched in term of seeking the common good and favoring dialogue. "To have a peaceful and stable Egypt is very important for Saudi and the rest of the Arab world," said Abdullah al-Askar, foreign affairs committee chairman at Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, a body appointed by King Abdullah to advice on policy. Stressing he was speaking in his personal capacity, Askar said that given the anti-government protests' size, President Mohammad Mursi should be more open to the opposition's complaints.

## Algerian bloodshed

"I think it's advisable to give attention to these people and listen to them. He was elected and came to power with the voice of these people," Askar told Reuters. The only official comments from the Gulf on the situation in Egypt came from Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, who appealed to Egyptians to avoid bloodshed, and Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled al-Sabah. "In this period, although we are following the developments and events in Egypt with concern, I want to reiterate our confidence that our Egyptian brothers are capable of overcoming the current situation," Sheikh Sabah said. UAE political scientist Abdulkhaleq Abdulla warned of a repeat of the Algerian scenario, where years of violence costing an estimated 150,000 lives followed the army's cancellation of 1991 elections that Islamists looked set to win. "The divisions in Egypt can ignite a cycle of violence, and if the army comes in, it may even be more violent," he said. Ebtessam Al Ketbi, another UAE analyst, said the silence of most Gulf Arab officials did not mean they were not worried over the situation there. "They don't want to be accused of taking sides at this stage. The Brotherhood are always ready to accuse the Gulf of financing the unrest," Ketbi, a political science professor at Emirates University in the United Arab Emirates, said. "But it is not a secret that there are those in the Gulf who want to see the fall of this model," she added. Not all Gulf states are hostile to the Brotherhood. Qatar was alone among Gulf Arab states in celebrating the 2011 Arab Spring revolt that toppled former president Hosni Mubarak, a foe of Iran and a longtime ally of the hereditary states that sit on nearly a quarter of the world's oil reserves.

### **Qatar: a change in stance on Egypt?**

Qatar has been a major financier of the Islamist groups around the Arab World, including Egypt's Brotherhood. "Qatar must be viewing the situation in Egypt with alarm. It has been a backer of the Egyptian government and I see no reason that it will fall back from that," Salman Shaikh, director of the Brookings Doha Centre, said. But a change in Qatari leadership last week that saw the emir succeeded by his 33-year-old son Sheikh Tamim has raised questions about a possible shift away from the Brotherhood. Influential Muslim cleric Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi had denied reports that Qatar's young emir had asked him to leave the country, but the denial has failed to quell rumors of a rift beginning to emerge with the Muslim Brotherhood. There were also unconfirmed reports that Qatar, which has flown hundreds of its citizens home since the protests began, had also recalled its ambassador, fearing for his safety. "The new Qatari Emir gave mixed messages in his first speech, first saying that Qatar does not take sides and then indicating that he will continue his father's policy," UAE commentator Sultan al-Qassemi said. "But from the way he greeted Qaradawi, kissing him on the shoulder this shows a sign of respect for this man and what he represents," he added. Unlike Qatar, most Gulf Arab states regretted losing Mubarak, fearing the Brotherhood's rise would embolden Islamists at home to challenge their long-established tribal monarchies. The United Arab Emirates has launched a crackdown on Islamists, culminating in the conviction on Tuesday of more than 60 people on charges of plotting to seize power. "For the UAE the story is very clear. The Brotherhood is now their enemy number one, closely followed by Iran," said Toby Matthiesen, author of a new book on the impact of the Arab uprisings and sectarianism on Gulf states.