



PERSPECTIVE

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE CLOUDS: ASSESSING THE GCC'S 23RD SUMMIT

By

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As with every GCC summit, the one that concluded in Doha, Qatar, this past weekend (December 20-22) was a meeting like no other.



Since the GCC's inception in May 1981, the experience of being invited to attend each of these annual gatherings has always been a special privilege for this analyst of Arabian Peninsula and Gulf affairs. Not least among the reasons is that it has inevitably provided an unparalleled chance to share with others a range of exceptionally rich information and insight observed directly and gleaned in the course of meetings and discussions with the summiteers.

Given the darkening regional clouds on the horizon at the moment, the opportunity to be present for this year's summit was especially valuable. As with all the previous years' meetings, this one provided once again a means to observe in action the leaders in one of the world's most important regions at a pivotal moment in their history.

In particular, the summit afforded a rare occasion to witness the convening of these leaders amidst an air of extraordinary anxiety and uncertainty. It also permitted being able to gauge how, in varying degrees of decisiveness, they were able to engage, finesse, and debate a spectrum of regional and intra-regional issues of immense importance. Indeed, the issues which engaged their interest are ones of ongoing importance not only to their people and neighbors, but, also, to their friends, allies, and strategic partners further a field.

WINDOW

This particular summit, as with all the others, also afforded a window onto the current status of a broad range of pressing policy-related challenges. A virtual smorgasbord of topics discussed formally and informally included several aspects of the looming crisis with Iraq and the implications of the continuing mobilization and deployment of U.S. forces to the region.

The focus of their deliberations encompassed, in addition, the imminent emergence of the GCC's (and the Arab world's first) common market, the pain in every Arab Christian and Muslim's heart that relates to Palestine, and the unprecedented de facto boycott of the summit by the heads of state of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.



Also in evidence and examined, albeit mainly away from the headlights in private meetings off to the side, were several issues of perennial interest to Gulf watchers. These included the current state of intra-Arab relations, the position and role of the Arab media, and the interplay of pan-GCC and pan-Arab concerns amidst the reality of differing and sometimes competing and conflicting national interests.

Imbedded in all of these and other issues in play are matters of statecraft of considerable moment, for which the acquisition of up-to-date first hand knowledge and understanding, even for specialists, are seldom, if ever, easy to come by.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As is normal and almost routine in such circumstances, regarding challenges and opportunities specific to one or more GCC countries and to the GCC region as a whole, the summitters found themselves sometimes disagreeing and at other times coming near but not quite close enough to a level of consensus with the potential to lay a particular issue to rest or, if not, then at least in abeyance until their next meeting. In such instances, they tended instead to cut short their deliberations with a view to allowing more time for further research and consideration.

But now and again the exact opposite occurred. This was when the summitters demonstrated a collective ability to reach agreement on issues of importance to everyone. In each of these instances, the policy breakthroughs achieved were laced with direct and indirect implications for the needs, concerns and interests of their constituents and others watching from afar.

That a great many people are keen to know what did and did not transpire at such meetings is self-evident. Of particular importance in this regard is the timing and relevance of much of what was

examined and addressed.

In this summit, as in all the others, much of the subject matter under consideration has a direct bearing not only on the international relations and objectives of other governments in the immediate region. The topics deliberated are also of great and ongoing interest to leaders and policymakers in the rest of the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world in general.

NATURE OF THIS REPORT

The following report is based on a meeting, immediately following the summit, that others and I had with Shaikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Jabr Al-Thani, Qatar's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Shaikh Hamad is tasked with playing a key role with regard to the GCC in the period ahead. He hosted the meeting of the GCC's Ministerial Council, which is comprised of the organization's six foreign ministers. He is also the new chairman of this Council, the primary body responsible for formulating GCC policies, for the coming year.

For reasons of clarity and order, the substance of the material presented herein is organized, in a sequence other than that which actually transpired, in the format of questions and answers as indicated in brackets. These comprised the focus and scope of a discussion that lasted more than an hour. It will be noted that GCC Secretary General Abdulrahman bin Hamad Al-Attiyah, who was present throughout the entire meeting, answered several of the questions. The author has made a best-faith effort to avoid doing damage to the thoughts expressed. Any mistakes are my responsibility.

STATEMENT BY QATARI FOREIGN MINISTER AND NEW GCC MINISTERIAL CHAIRMAN SHAIKH HAMAD BIN JASSIM AL-JABR AL-THANI



“Each of the heads of delegations was able to meet privately with their counterparts in each of the other GCC countries, as is the custom at these annual meets.

“Among other things, the substance of these meetings covered, as expected, the unfolding situation in Iraq with regard to the United Nations inspectors, and the deteriorating situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“Special note was made of the Qatari Amir's taking the opportunity to emphasize the educational challenges facing the GCC region as a whole. The Amir's focus on this issue was expected and natural, given the Qatari government's accelerated momentum, for more than half a decade, towards making the goal of educational reform and development one of the country's highest national priorities.

“A highlight of the summit's focus on economic issues was confirmation of the long-awaited unified

tariff [customs duty] that will make for a GCC common market. In keeping with last year's summit decisions, the implementation of an external customs duty of five per cent on imported goods and services is scheduled to take effect on January 1, 2003, which is two years ahead of the date agreed upon. At long last, pursuant to becoming an economic bloc, we have surmounted the one remaining hurdle on the road to our negotiating jointly a free trade accord with the European Union."

DISCUSSION

IRAQ:

[Q:] "What did the summit have to say about Iraq?"

[A:] "We are pleased with Iraq's having agreed to readmit the inspectors. The two most important points are, on one hand, that the inspectors have to be scrupulous, and, on the other hand, that the political decision about what is to be done or not to be done regarding Iraq has to be kept separate from the inspectors' work.

"We did not discuss taking part in any military strike against Iraq. We talked a lot about Iraq, but our decisions were taken secretly. They are not for public comment or discussion.



[Q:] "All these reports and scenarios that we keep hearing and reading about [with regard to Iraq] are nothing but distractions. No one is being fooled. The solution to the Iraq situation will be an American solution.

[A:] "All of us hope that there will NOT be a military strike. But our ability to influence the outcome one way or another is not that great. If one looks at our influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it's clear that we haven't been able to influence anything. This doesn't mean that we couldn't, but we haven't so far.

[Q:] "Did the summit agree on any diplomatic initiative to be taken towards Iraq?"

[A:] "No. We seek a peaceful resolution. We speak with Iraq. We convey to it our ideas as to how to solve the situation peacefully. But at the end of the day [what the government there does and does not do] is up to Iraq.

[Q:] "It seems that the summit had some tough words to say *about* Iraq but not *against* Iraq.

Related to this, what is one to make of the recent demonstrations in Cairo opposing any attack against Iraq and statements by critics as to how Qatar and other GCC countries were previously strong supporters of Iraq, but now they are the opposite?

[A:] “As for the demonstrations that have taken place in Cairo and elsewhere, it’s not clear where the lines of the demonstrators and other critics’ interpretations are coming from. For example, it’s not helpful for anyone to state, without an effort to provide context or perspective, that we were one day against Saddam Hussein and were also previously against Yemen, but now we are not.

“The international line that is being taken by some Arab commentators on these issues raises lots of questions. If one looks at the larger scene within the Arab world, it is doubtful whether a minimal level of agreement could be reached on this issue were we to have an Arab summit. Thus far, we have only reactions.

[Q:] “Iraqi Vice President Taha Ramadan is reported to have spoken against any Arab country taking part in an aggression against Iraq.

[A:] “We hope that the problems with Iraq will be solved peacefully. Taking part would be very painful. But everyone, including Iraq, knows where [an attack] would come from. The GCC countries are all keen that there not be any military attack against Iraq. This is in keeping with our philosophy.

[Q:] “Is it possible for the GCC countries to stop the United States from hitting Iraq?

[A:] “No, we cannot. Tell me, ‘Who can?’

[Q:] “Have you been negotiating with Saddam to give up power?

[A:] “No. I have never discussed with him that he should step down. Statements to this effect are false and consist entirely of rumors in newspapers.

“A principle that we try to adhere to involves not interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries. When I have gone to talk with him, it has only been to discuss recent developments and how these have been escalating.

PALESTINE INTIFADA

[Q:] “In the final communiqué, in contrast with previous summits, we saw no statement in support of the Palestinian Intifada, and we saw nothing about providing financial support for the Palestinians either.

[A:] “Aid for the Palestinians is provided primarily through the offices of the League of Arab States, together with some Arab countries’ making additional contributions to that aid. As to the Intifada, our support is aimed at taking the Palestinians out of the [situation in which] they are being killed. This support is not just rhetoric.

[Q:] “But what is one to make of the fact that, for all the American talk about a ‘road map’ for bringing an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, we have yet to see not only a credible road map, but, also, any serious effort by the United States to implement a solution?”

“Everyone of course recognizes that we benefit from the United States in this particular region, and vice versa. But we derive no benefit from the United States with regard to the Palestine Question. In recent days, what we see is but yet another American postponement at the request of Israel. We see no United States help in solving this problem.

[A:] “We have called on the United Nations Security Council to enforce its resolutions. All the GCC countries will continue to be supportive of the Palestinians for as long as the Israeli occupation persists.

“Since 9-11, Israel has greatly benefited from developing its stance and approach to the Americans, who are the greatest player in this matter, by saying that the issue is one of ‘terrorism.’

“We need to restore the negotiations [between Israelis and Palestinians] to where they were before they were suspended. We know, however, that the Arab countries are currently not in the best situation to be able to influence either this issue or the one we presently face in the Gulf.

U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE

[Q:] “What do you have to say about the American military presence here?”

[A:] “The purpose of the American defense presence in Qatar is to protect not only the interests of the United States, but us, too, as we have common interests.

[Q:] “Does the recent visit of U.S. military officials to Doha and the country’s bases mean that Qatar will be taking part in a possible attack against Iraq?”

[A:] “We are granting the United States access to our facilities not to attack anyone, but for other reasons, ones that have nothing to do with Iraq.

“Look, in order to bring an end to the Second World War, many countries had to seek the aid of the United States. Consider the five Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council. [jda: In addition to the United States, these are China, France, Great Britain and Russia, all of which were granted veto authority at the time the United Nations was founded and its Charter was adopted in 1945]. These countries, too, feel a need for the power of the United States.

“So, let’s not be naïve here. What country is totally independent and without a need to cooperate with other countries -- politically, economically, and otherwise?”

[Q:] “As to what people have been saying about Qatar opening the door to the Americans, is the issue driving such a decision and policy one of Qatar’s ‘small size,’ as you have indicated, or, rather, one of principle? For example, Lebanon, too, is a small country. Yet it managed to prevail over Israel in the sense that the Israelis finally agreed that they had no choice but to withdraw.

[A:] “As to why we have the United States here, once again a useful frame of reference is the European Union. A more specific frame of reference would be the case of a very small European country like Luxembourg. One can hardly find it on a map, yet it exists and is not in danger of being destroyed.

“Having said this, one must not lose sight of the fact that Europe’s economic and political systems have developed over the course of hundreds of years, during which its countries have devised a variety of ways to solve their problems. We hope their experience will set an example for us.

‘A NEW ARAB STRATEGY?’

[Q:] “The Amir has spoken very recently about the need for ‘a new Arab strategy,’ and that a discussion about what such a strategy might be could perhaps be the topic of an emergency Arab summit. Could you comment on this?

[A:] “What the Amir has said about possibly having a special Arab summit was not about anything in particular that Qatar sought to achieve for itself. Rather, the idea of having such a meeting originated in response to Libya indicating that it wanted to withdraw from the League of Arab States.

“I went to speak with [Libya’s] Muammar Qadhdhafi about this matter. When I returned and reported to the Amir, it was thought that perhaps there would be value in having a meeting of the League’s members to hear Libya out.

“As to the need for discussing and devising what could be the components of an Arab strategy, it is instructive to note that the League of Arab States was established [in 1945] prior to the creation of the European Union. But look at where the EU is and where the Arab League is now.

“It seems obvious that we have no clear or comprehensive strategy. Instead, each country appears to have a different view on the issues, with some thinking only of themselves without regard to the others. We want to have a minimum of jointness. But at the present time this isn’t in the cards.

“We don’t have a strategy. There is no Arab plan. You can’t tell me that we have an Arab plan towards Palestine, or that we have one towards the rest of the world, or that we have devised an effective means to function as a unified economic bloc.

“The situations we face today, of course, are vastly different from the ones we confronted in the not too distant past. Once, not all that long ago, neither Iraq nor Iran was regarded as a threat.

“Back then, there was the Cold War. That, in itself, provided a degree of international strategic clarity. As a result of that clarity, our countries and people played a variety of roles that helped to bring the Cold War to an end. Indeed, we sent our sons to Afghanistan to help liberate it from the Soviet Union. The United States was with us in this, and vice versa.

[Q:] “Will Qatar draft a ‘new strategy’ for the League of Arab States?”

[A:] “We have given some ideas to [League Secretary General] Amr Moussa as to why we believe having an Arab strategy is important, and we have authorized him to distribute these ideas to other member-states.

RULERS’ ABSENCE

[Q:] “Earlier, in the run-up to the summit, there was a report that possibly none of the heads of state would attend. Some surmised that, were this to come to pass, only the Ministerial Council [jda: comprised of the GCC’s six foreign ministers] would meet, which is something that in the history of these annual summits has never happened before. Would you comment?”

[A:] “Bahrain and Saudi Arabia decided to reduce the level of their representation. The absence of the rulers of Kuwait and the UAE was no surprise in light of their not having attended for reasons owing to their health.

[Q:] “Even so, what does it mean to have had, apart from Qatar’s own head of state, only Sultan Qaboos attend when all the other rulers were absent, with their countries being represented instead by their foreign ministers? Everyone appreciates Sultan Qaboos’ having come. We know how farsighted a visionary he is and the value he brings to any meeting. Yet it seemed at one point leading up to the summit that he would find himself in the midst of a gathering only of foreign ministers, which, had that been the case, could have led to Qaboos’ canceling his own participation.

“As to the UAE, everyone also knows that the Emirates have been represented in these summits by the UAE’s Vice-President for some time. And all are aware that circumstances related to the Amir of Kuwait’s health, and that of the Kuwaiti Crown Prince, too, prevented their participation. But there’s no doubt that Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince and Bahrain’s King would have added value to the summit.

[A:] “What our Amir [jda: Ruler of Qatar Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and, for the coming year, the Chairman of the GCC’s Supreme Council, the organization’s paramount decision making body] had to say regarding these points is relevant: namely, that agreements reached and actions undertaken in settings such as this are more important than personalities.

“Of course, we had especially hoped to have Crown Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia and the King of Bahrain with us. They would have made strong additions. But the decisions were up to them. Such disagreements, we feel, should be solved bilaterally.

“For perspective, there are disagreements within the European Union, but all of the EU’s member-countries attend the meetings as scheduled with a level of representation suitable to their needs, and they remain free to disagree and argue.

“We are pleased that the meeting was held, that the agenda was adopted as presented, and that decisions were taken. As to the level of representation by individual countries, this is a matter that

is left to the governments of the member-states themselves.

QATAR AND SAUDI ARABIA

[Q:] “Because Qatar has not apologized to Saudi Arabia for an Al-Jazeera TV satellite channel program this past summer that featured [jda: a speaker from a non-GCC country, who used the occasion to portray the modern history of Saudi Arabia in a very negative light], it is being said by some that, for the sake of the summit scheduled to be held next year in Kuwait, the speaker that the program featured will be sacrificed. Would you comment?”

[A:] “I have said that while we see no reason to apologize, we want to have a serious discussion with those in the Kingdom who have expressed their concerns about this matter, for we respect Saudi Arabia and its very important role in the region.

“We accept any open dialogue with our brothers. We will of course apologize if we have made mistakes. But we think that brothers should not put apology as an obstacle between them, especially as in this case, if another party from a country outside the GCC region is involved. Al-Jazeera no doubt makes mistakes. But the road to correcting them cannot be made by retreating from the policy of allowing and encouraging freedom of speech.

“For our part, we cannot accept any offense against Saudi Arabia. No one in the summit spoke about the need for an apology in any meeting. I know, as I was present in each one of them for the entire time. We can deal with these matters through dialogue with each other. As to the non-GCC country’s speaker who was a guest on the program in question, no one mentioned his name.

[Q:] “Is it true that you went to Riyadh but no one was there to receive you?”

[A:] “No, I haven’t gone to Saudi Arabia, and I haven’t asked to go. It was our minister of state for foreign affairs who went to Riyadh to invite its officials to attend the summit. I haven’t any reservations about going to Riyadh.

[Q:] “Do you think relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia are going to get worse?”

[A:] “We have much in common with Saudi Arabia. One or two issues where we may disagree will not separate us. We have to work through these things.

[Q:] “Do you think that Al-Jazeera is still a ‘nuisance’ to Saudi Arabia?”

[A:] “Al-Jazeera was not discussed at the summit.

BAHRAIN AND QATAR

[Q:] “Given the fact that Bahrain’s head of state has attended all of the previous GCC summits, doesn’t the absence of its king on this occasion say something negative about this particular gathering?”

[A:] “Qatar is Bahrain’s second home. The decision of Bahrain’s king not to come was his. As for ourselves, we want to attend all conferences and summits. If we were not to be present at such gatherings, we would be denying our policy, which is always to attend and participate, particularly so as to defend our views.

KUWAIT AND THE GCC

[Q:] “It seems that this region is acquiescing to the reintroduction of imperialism. Look at Kuwait [jda: where American forces have been conducting military maneuvers right next to the Iraqi border].

[A:] “As for some charging that recent developments are equivalent to ‘a reintroduction of imperialism,’ these kinds of interpretations, at best, are rumors. Regarding Kuwait, its security is a matter of importance to all of us. Kuwait’s concerns are our concerns. Any challenge to Kuwait is a challenge to each and everyone one of us. Kuwait is a vital member of the GCC.

[Q:] “How do you see relations evolving between Iraq and Kuwait?”

[A: GCC Sec. Gen.:] “There was special mention rejecting all the claims that Iraq has made in the past regarding Kuwait’s legitimacy.

[Q:] “Many Kuwaitis have been interpreting Iraq’s offer earlier this month of an apology for its invasion of 1990, in which it included a call for Kuwaitis to resist the United States, as but yet another Iraqi threat against Kuwait and not at all an apology despite what some have said.

“As one of the GCC’s founding members, we had expected a clear and forthright apology by Iraq to Kuwait and to the Kuwaiti people, not something that was stated with the intent of influencing the United Nations Security Council. Did the summit have anything to say about this?”

[A:] “All six of us believe it was not an apology and we said so.

[Q:] “Can’t Kuwait and others view Iraq’s statement against Kuwait as a reason to justify an attack against Iraq?”

[A:] “The United States does not need any excuse or support from the GCC for that [jda: i.e., to attack Iraq].

QATAR-OMAN PIPELINE?

[Q:] “We hear that serious consideration is being given to the idea of building an energy pipeline to Oman and that this could be a force for GCC integration. Please comment.

[A:] “The proposal for such a project came from Qatar. It is envisioned that there could be a pipeline from Qatar to the UAE that would continue on to Oman. A committee is studying its

feasibility and is to submit its recommendations for consideration at a meeting in the near future.

QATAR AND THE GCC

[Q:] “To what extent is it true that Qatar’s foreign policies are a ‘nuisance’ to the other GCC members?”

[A:] “This is something that is being promoted by some in the media. The main point at issue is, ‘How is it that we are a nuisance?’ Is it because we signed an agreement with the United States? Is it because we did this or that to improve our educational system? Is it because of what we have been doing to improve the quality of our public affairs? If so, such matters are our own business.

“Not so long ago many people said, with regard to our relations with Yemen, that we were ‘fiddling out of tune’ because we did not support the [jda: April-July 1994] effort by the southern part of the country to secede. In addition, many who criticized us for trying to have better relations with Iran made similar accusations. Now, though, it is clear that everyone else has done the same thing that we did.

“We are part of the GCC. If we can’t add value, we will do our best not to add damage.

QATAR AND EGYPT

[Q:] Among those who fought to liberate Afghanistan are some who, since then, have taken part in street demonstrations in Egypt. Some of these have sought to pressure Qatar and other GCC countries. Why is the reason for this?

[A:] “Their charge against us is that we have broken ranks with the Arab world. They accuse us of favoring an attack against Iraq.

“This is not the first time that our actions and policies have been twisted out of context and misunderstood. We have had to deal with these kinds of things being said about us for a long time. I don’t know what to say other than people are free to say what they want and that, in Qatar, we do not censor those who take such liberties.

YEMEN AND THE GCC

[Q:] “What, if anything, was discussed with regard to Yemen? Will Yemen join the GCC?”

[A:] “Omani Foreign Minister Yousef Alawi [jda: the outgoing Chairman of the GCC’s Ministerial Council] announced in the summit that he had signed an agreement with Yemen in which Yemen would henceforth be attending the meetings of four GCC Standing Committees.

ECONOMIC ISSUES AND CURRENCY UNIFICATION

[Q:] “It seems that there was a particular effort in this summit to stay clear of political issues and focus on economic issues instead. If so, what’s the reason?”

[A:] “Economic issues have always been the most prominent ones discussed at each of the summits. Such matters are the ones that are the most important to people’s livelihoods and interests. If we can succeed in achieving success at the economic level, this will affect the prospects for our ability to accomplish things at the political level.

[Q:] “Do you have any comment on reports that the GCC is giving serious and favorable consideration to unifying the member-states’ currencies by 2010? If so, isn’t that quite distant?”

[A:] “If such a currency unification were to occur by then, in my view, that’s very near.

WATER ISSUES

[Q:] “Did the summit have anything to say about water issues in terms of the GCC countries?”

[A: GCC Sec. Gen.:] “Oman has had special experience related to this matter. Its delegation proposed that special emphasis be given to the issue of future GCC needs with regard to water. It was unanimously agreed that Oman undertake and present to the GCC the results of a feasibility study as to how the members could enhance their cooperation in this area.

POPULAR PARTICIPATION

[Q:] “What about increasing the level of popular participation in decision making in the GCC countries?”

[A:] “The member countries and the GCC itself have already started this. There is the GCC consultative assembly. [jda: The assembly is comprised of 30 individuals, or five appointed representatives from each member-state]. In addition, the Amir of Qatar believes that any contribution by the people themselves and their institutions can only enrich the [member-countries’] national development processes.

“The results of this kind of activism are usually popular. Such initiatives are especially welcomed when they lead to a joint responsibility for implementation. But the process itself should be in accordance with each country’s needs and means. The GCC countries have their own individual systems of governance.

“On the matter of increasing the nature and pace of political participation within the GCC countries, however, some were strongly in favor while others were of the view that we should be patient on this front.

[Q:] “Was there any discussion about turning the GCC’s current consultative authority into an elected parliament at some point?”

[A: GCC Sec. Gen.:] “The summit discussed issues related to the consultative assembly. It was agreed that there would be value in having the assembly deliberate two particular issues of growing importance to the GCC as a whole: namely, the implications of the member-states’ high rate of population growth and of various increasing challenges and opportunities related to the role of women and the family.

“Thus far, in the course of designating specific issues referred to the assembly by the Supreme Council, there has been no discussion of turning the body into an elected parliament.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM

[Q:] “The Amir, in his opening speech, made a point of mentioning the importance of reforming educational curricula and about increasing popular participation within the GCC region. In his closing remarks, however, he mentioned again only education, but said nothing about enhancing political participation. Is there any reason?

[A:] “The Amir’s remarks at the beginning and, again, at the end, were his own. They were not linked to the agenda in any way; indeed, they were made outside the agenda. Although neither of these topics was on the agenda, it was agreed that they were important enough to be included in the Amir’s statements.

“That said, the substance of his comments with regard to these two issues was indeed discussed during the summit, and there was total agreement about the importance of the need to reform our respective educational systems.

[Q:] “When the Amir speaks about educational reform, what does he have in mind? Is it the educational curricula or something else?

[A:] “We have problems that not only result from the curricula but, also, from the quality of the teachers. The purpose of education should be to develop the student in all areas. How to do this should be up to each country. This topic was discussed, but no decision was taken, as not only were Qatar’s views different, but so were the views of all the others.”

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