



T.R.

BURSA ULUDAG UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**THREATS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES: A
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SAUDI ARABIA, THE
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AND BAHRAIN BEFORE AND
SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS.**

(PhD. THESIS)

Zainul Abideen JIBRIL

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Supervisor

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ABSTRACT

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THREATS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SAUDI ARABIA, THE UAE AND BAHRAIN BEFORE AND SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

This research examines the threat perceptions and different responses of states in dealing with common threats perceptions. Balancing strategies such as armament and alliance with other states are mainly the consequence of threats or perceived threats in states' internal and external environment. States that share structural similarities are expected to behave in similar ways while balancing their threats. However, often at times, differences are noticed in the balancing strategies of similar states. In the Gulf, upheavals such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the war that ensued as a consequence, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, the US invasion of Iraq, and the Arab Uprisings shaped the region's security dynamics. Threatened by these upheavals, the states took different strategies to balance their threat perceptions. To arrive at a plausible explanation, the Most Similar Systems Design was used to determine the similar states to understand and explain the reasons for the difference. Therefore, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain were carefully selected given that they share common threat perceptions; they are monarchical and authoritarian, among other things. The threat perceptions and balancing strategies of the states were examined. The result suggests that differences inherent to the states determine the nature and magnitude of threat perception and explain why states that perceive similar threats reacted differently.

Key Words: Threat Perception, Balancing, the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain

ÖZET

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TEHDİTLER VE DENGEME STRATEJİLERİ: SUUDİ ARABİSTAN, BİRLEŞİK ARAP EMİRLİKLERİ VE BAHREYN'İN ARAP BAHARI ÖNCESİ DÖNEM İLE ARAP BAHARI SONRASI DÖNEMİ STRATEJİLERİNİN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI ANALİZİ

Bu araştırma, tehdit algılarını ve devletlerin ortak tehdit algılarıyla başa çıkmadaki farklı tepkilerini incelemektedir. Silahlanma ve diğer devletlerle ittifak gibi dengeleme stratejileri, esas olarak devletlerin iç ve dış ortamlarındaki tehditlerin veya algılanan tehditlerin bir sonucudur. Yapısal benzerlikleri paylaşan devletlerin tehditleri dengelerken benzer şekilde davranmaları beklenmektedir. Bununla birlikte, çoğu zaman, benzer durumların dengeleme stratejilerinde farklılıkların ortaya çıkması söz konusu olabilmektedir. Nitekim Körfez'de İran İslam Devrimi, İran-Irak Savaşı, Irak'ın Kuveyt'i işgali, ABD'nin Irak'ı işgali ve Arap Baharı gibi olaylar bölgenin güvenlik dinamiklerini şekillendirmiştir. Bu olaylardan dolayı tehdit altında olan devletler, tehdit algılarını dengelemek için farklı stratejiler kullanmışlardır. Makul bir açıklamaya ulaşmak, farklılığın nedenlerini anlayıp açıklamak ve benzer durumları belirlemek için En Benzer Sistemler Tasarımı (Most Similar Systems Design) kullanılmaktadır. Bu nedenle, monarşi ile yönetilmeleri ve otoriter yapılar olmaları dolayısıyla Suudi Arabistan, BAE ve Bahreyn ortak tehdit algılarını paylaştıkları için dikkatle seçilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda devletlerin tehdit algılamaları ve dengeleme stratejileri incelenmiştir. Sonuç, devletlerin doğasında var olan farklılıkların tehdit algısının doğasını ve büyüklüğünü belirlediğini ve benzer tehditleri algılayan devletlerin neden farklı tepki verdiğini açıkladığını göstermektedir. Bu çalışma teorik olarak, tehditler ve dengeleme stratejileri üzerine daha önceden yapılan çalışmalarda dahil edilmemiş bazı değişkenleri ekleyerek literatüre katkıda bulunmuştur. Yapısal teoriler ve omnibalancing, birim düzeyindeki değişkenlerin devletlerin dengeleme stratejileri üzerindeki etkisini açıklamakta yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma, benzer tehditlere verilen yanıtları daha iyi kavramak için devletlere özgü birim düzeyindeki özellikleri eklemiştir. Araştırmanın temel bulgusu, devletlerin benzer tehditleri algılamasına rağmen, demografik yapıları, liderlerin algılanan rolü, finansal kaldıraç gibi kendilerine özgü bazı birim düzeyindeki özelliklerin tehdit algılamasının doğasını ve büyüklüğünü belirlemesidir. Yukarıdaki birim düzeyindeki özellikler, benzer tehditleri algılayan devletlerin neden farklı tepki verdiğini de açıklamaktadır. Bu faktörler, bir devletin belli bir politikayı tercih etmesinin temel nedeninin kendine özgü karakteri olduğunu göstermez. Ancak diğer devletlerden farklı olarak bir

devletin neden bu şekilde davrandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırmada ortaya çıkan diğer bir bulgu ise, devletler algıladıkları tehditleri dengelemek için benzer stratejiler izleseler de taahhütlerinin aynı olmadığı yönünde ortaya çıkmıştır.



Anahtar Kelimeler: Tehdit Algısı, Dengeleme, Körfez, Suudi Arabistan, BAE, Bahreyn

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Zainul Abideen Jibril
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATACMS	Army Tactical Missile Systems
BoP	Balance of Power
CAIR	Council on American-Islamic Relations
DCA	Defence Cooperation Agreement
DP World	Dubai Ports World
EDIC	Emirati Defence Industries Company
FNC	Federal National Council
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GNA	Government of the National Accord
IFLB	Islamic Liberation Front of Bahrain
IISS	The International Institute for Strategic Studies
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JDAM	Join Direct Attack Munitions
LNA	Libyan National Army
MAS	Muslim American Society
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MEK	Mujahedin-e-Khalq
MESA	Middle East Strategic Alliance
MSSD	Most Similar Systems Design
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NFA	National Forces Alliance
PDKI	Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
PFLOAG	Popular Liberation Front of Oman and the Arabian Gulf
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
SAM	Surface to Air Missiles
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SOFA	Status of Force Agreement
TMC	Transitional Military Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Throughout history, threats and their perceptions have spurred balancing strategies by states. States faced by threats from their stronger or more threatening neighbours opted for strategies that include armament and alliances, both at the regional and extra-regional levels, to serve as a security guarantee. In the Gulf, following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the new leadership attempted to export its revolution to its near abroad. Tehran's rhetoric and actions culminated in a war with Iraq that lasted almost a decade. These two events threatened the states so much that they had to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The states also responded by supporting Iraq during the war. Of note is that Iraq has been a threat to the countries, especially before the Algiers agreement in 1975, where republican Iraq moderated its policies towards the countries in the region. Two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq occupied Kuwait. The states in the Gulf did not expect the onslaught on Kuwait; as a result, the threat they perceived from Iraq increased. Since the liberation of Kuwait by an international coalition, the small states of the Gulf signed Defence Cooperation Agreements with the US, thereby concretising the US security umbrella. The ouster of Saddam Hussein by the US in 2003 brought about a power vacuum that Iran utilized to increase its influence in the region. Iran since supported groups that are against the US and its interest in the Middle East. Since the states have a significant number of American troops on their soil, they became a target of Iran, at least in rhetoric. In addition, the states saw the need to balance an aggressive neighbour with a clandestine nuclear programme.

With the Arab Uprisings, which started in December 2010, the threat perception of the regimes under study changed from the hitherto external to include internal. More threatening to the regimes is the transnational nature of the threats, i.e., the threat in the internal environment is linked to the threats they perceive in their external milieu. Protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and the ascension of Islamists to power in Egypt and Tunisia have threatened the regimes. Given that the states hold a status quo stance, anything that will bring about regime change is seen as an existential threat to their survival. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) perceive the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as

an existential threat to their survival because the MB seems to offer an alternative to the majority of Arabs that have been calling for democracy-like reforms in the Arab world.

Moreover, with the transnational nature of the MB, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became so apprehensive of the rise of MB and Islamists. While the MB led government in Cairo was evicted via a military coup supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the countries under study seem to perceive a threat from the MB because of its broad support among the Middle East populace. Additionally, the Arab Uprisings also gave Iran the chance of expanding its influence in relations to the alliance of the Gulf monarchs. Indeed, Iran saw the unrest as a revival of the 1979 revolution and therefore supported the awakening. Furthermore, Tehran created an “*axis of resistance*” with states such as Syria and Iraq, and non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen to resist the Washington-Arab Gulf states alliance in the Middle East.

As the Arab Uprisings impacted the nature of threats the regimes perceived (it increased the already existing internal challenges to the regimes), it also affected how the states responded to threats. The states focused on clampdown on dissents in the internal environment, issuing palliatives to the unemployed and poor masses, economic reforms while embarking on armament policies. In the external environment, balancing their threat perceptions took the form of maintaining the already existing regional and extra-regional alliances. The states also embarked on different strategies such as indirect methods, including aiding militia groups, dissidents, terrorist organizations, strategic economic aid inter alia as part of their strategies of managing the threats they perceived.

Statement of the Problem

This research examines the responses of some selected states in the Gulf in dealing with common threats perceived before and since the Arab Uprisings. Threat perceptions have generated long-running debate among experts about their impact on states’ behaviours as they respond to the threats. Accordingly, researchers have studied threat perceptions and responses, including alliances, armament, and military expenditure. In

realist and neo-realist literature, threats are mainly perceived from other states' strength, making states act through armament or alliances to balance the power.¹

Stephen Walt gave a rival explanation for understanding threat perceptions and balancing strategies. In his opinion, states do not respond to power, but to threats perceived due to aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions another state may have.² However, in the Third World, Stephen David noted that threats come from both within and outside state boundaries and that regimes act by forming alliances with an external source of threat to maintain their grip on power.³ Undoubtedly, the Arab Gulf ruling families made sure their rule continued unabated with the help of the Western powers.⁴

Given that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain are structurally homogeneous and share similar threat perceptions, their responses are expected to be theoretically similar. However, their responses vary and are sometimes even conflictual. While the existing theories give us the insight to understand strategies used by states to mitigate threats they perceive, they did less to help us decipher why states that are structurally homogeneous with similar threat perceptions responded differently. What explains the variations in strategies which is sometimes incompatible and incoherent while responding to common threats, is what this work looks at.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to analyse the threats perceived by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain before and since the Arab Uprisings and its impact on their balancing behaviour. It explains why countries that perceive similar threats, albeit with varying magnitude, reacted differently.

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," *Realism Reader*, ed. by Colin Elman, Michael Jensen, New York, 2014, p. 182; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1979; Paul R. Viotti, Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, Fifth Edit Boston: Pearson, 2012.

² Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987.

³ Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

⁴ For detailed insight see: Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle," *Source: Political Science Quarterly*, 1991.

Research Questions

- 1 What are the driving forces for the states to prefer balancing/bandwagoning behaviour before the Arab Uprisings?
- 2 Do the states respond with the same level of balancing/bandwagoning act? If not, what are the underlying reasons?
- 3 How did the Arab Spring affect the threat perceptions of the Gulf states?
- 4 What is the role of internal and external threats in the Gulf states' balancing behaviours with the Arab Uprisings?
- 5 How did the states respond to the internal/external threats, and what are the similarities/differences?
- 6 What explains the difference in their strategies?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: Before the Arab Uprisings, where the states' threat perception is mainly from the external environment, the states under study share theoretically relevant threat perceptions (Iran and Iraq). They responded both internally (increased military spending to procure arms) and externally by joining a regional alliance with Saudi Arabia as the leader while seeking the security umbrella of bigger powers.

Hypothesis Two: While internal threats to the states existed before the Arab Uprisings, the event increased the magnitude of the internal threat perceptions, thereby making it equal to or even more prevalent to the external threats; since then, regime survival became key to the leaders balancing act.

Hypothesis Three: Saudi Arabia's strategies for managing its threat perceptions stem from its leader's perception that equates regional supremacy with regime survival, its economic status, and the regime's role as leaders of the Islamic world. Consequently, this brings about strategies inclined towards regional political order lest its survival becomes at stake.

Hypothesis Four: The UAE's response to threat is affected by its leader's perception, wealthy economic status, economic interest and historical ties Dubai had with Iran. While the UAE is working with Saudi Arabia to deal with the threats they face from Iran and the growth of the MB, it has sometimes unilaterally conceded to Iran.

Hypothesis Five: Bahrain wholeheartedly aligned its policies to that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Bahrain's blind bandwagoning strategy results from its limited resources and its demographic content of majority Shiites ruled by minority Sunni regime.

Methodology, Case Selection, and Research Design

This study would employ documentary research, where data pertaining to the research topic or question would be systematically sourced, evaluated and utilized. Relevant academic works on threat perceptions, alliance formation, armament, and military expenditure would be referred to and studied thoroughly to elicit the most relevant and current data.

The research employs the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), also known as Mills Method of Difference. The MSSD is "based on a belief that a number of theoretically significant differences will be found among similar systems and that these differences can be used in explanation."⁵ In this regard, De Meur and Berg-Schlosser indicated that the MSSD applies mainly to situations where matched correlations or a systematic comparison of few scenarios resulting in the reduction of 'conditions of occurrence' for investigative purposes to assess certain variables that may be liable for the particular outcome.⁶

In the literature on case selection for MSSD, homogeneity, i.e., the study area, should be determined; the cases should be sufficiently parallel to each other and comparable in specific dimensions. In addition, the case should have general background

⁵ Przeworski and Teune (1970), p.39 in: Benoit Rihoux, Charles Ragin, "Configurational Comparative Methods: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and Related Techniques," 2009.

⁶ Gisèle De Meur, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, "Comparing Political Systems: Establishing Similarities and Dissimilarities," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1994), pp. 193–219, doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.1994.tb00440.x.

properties that can be unchanged in the analysis.⁷ Based on the preceding, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were selected for this study.

Threat perception of the states (Independent variable)

The cases share almost similar threat perceptions from both their internal and external environment. Threats mainly emanated from states and sometimes from non-state actors as a consequence of shocks in the region. What impact has the threat perceived has on our dependent variable? How has that affected the actions of the state to counter the threats?

Structural Similarities of the states (Controlled variables)

The countries' structural homogeneity and idiosyncrasies are that they are *geographically located in the Gulf and have a form of authoritarian monarchical government system ruled by few Sunni elites*. It is important to note that while the systems they operate are similar, there are some differences. However, the difference is not so much significant in affecting the countries perceptions of threat or their responses and for such a reason, all the countries will be treated as the same—*authoritarian, monarchical and consisting of Sunnis as ruling elite; they share the interest of maintaining the status quo and regime survival; they have no offensive ambition* (although priorities of the states over offensive and defensive ambition may fluctuate, they do not generally harbour offensive ambitions. To put it in another way, generally, defensive interest is prioritized by the states since all the states share an interest in regime survival while having the ambition of fortifying their strength in relations to others); *they also share common threat perception and are all strategically exposed to aggressive hegemonic ambitions of their rivals and the Arab Uprisings*. The states are strategically interdependent because of Iran's meddling. By sharing common strategic exposure to Iran's aggressive intentions and the Arab Uprisings, which empowers the MB with an alternative to authoritarian rule, the regimes perceptions should be that the fall of one regime should eventually lead to the fall of the rest of the regimes. The interdependence among the states can be viewed in terms of exposure to the threat of regime change, thus leading to more cooperation and

⁷ *ibid.*

defensive measures. The countries are also dependent on the US's security umbrella to protect their economic and security interest of survival.

Unit level idiosyncrasies (intervening variables).

The unit-level idiosyncrasies will help us understand why the states that perceive similar threats responded differently. The intervening variable is usually hypothetical and will not mean that a state's particular character is the key reason it opts for a strategy. However, it gives us insight as to why a state acted in a way. *Demographic structure, economic status, leader's perceived role, level of threat perception* are the main variables that differentiate the three states, thus explaining the differences in their responses.

Internal and external efforts to balance threats (Dependent variable).

States are expected to respond to threats they perceived in their internal and external environments. This includes how a given state behaves vis-a-vis the threats to its survival which is perceived. To balance the perceived threats, states opted for internal efforts such as increasing their defence outlays to procure or locally build weapons and external efforts, which translates to alignment strategies or even taking a more aggressive stance towards what is perceived as threatening. This should include participating in other weak states' affairs that may have a link to a state's main rival or supporting some groups in other states to deal with what they perceive as threatening, among other things.

Chapter Synopsis

This research is composed of six chapters. Chapter one deals with the approaches to understanding threat perceptions and state responses which serves as the theoretical framework. Chapter two traverses us through the terrain of the changing security dynamics of the region since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Chapters three, four and five deal with each of the states' threat perceptions and responses in the internal and external environment. Finally, the sixth chapter presents the three cases to demonstrate the similarities and explain the reasons for the different, sometimes conflicting strategies of states when balancing their similar threat perceptions.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I. STRUCTURAL/SYSTEMIC APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THREATS AND RESPONSES

Systemic theories to dealing with threats or their perceptions focus on the external environment. This means that threats to a state come from other states due to an anarchic international system. Systemic approaches to balancing threats suggest that the international system's structure and states position vis-à-vis other states determine its responses to threats it perceived. Theories such as the balance of power and balance of threat fall under this category.

A. BALANCE OF POWER THEORY

The most basic assumption of the Balance of Power (BoP) is that states' primary motivation is to deter other states from gaining so much power.⁸ When actors in the international system feel threatened by a state that has grown too powerful, states tend to ally against the dominant country to counterbalance it. Morgenthau sees the state's ambition (more like human nature) for power to dominate as the distinguishing element of international politics.⁹ As a result of uncertainties regarding states' strengths that characterise the international system, states aspire for immeasurable power.¹⁰ This assumption is shared by John Mearsheimer, who is of the offensive variant of the neorealist school. However, the international system's anarchic nature requires states to acquire power as much as they can. Corroborating Morgenthau, Mearsheimer argues that, "given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognise that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power."¹¹ As a result, a strong state amasses as much power as possible, as it is better off with power.

⁸ Sangit Dwivedi, "Alliances in International Relations Theory," *International Journal of Social Science and Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. 1, no. 8 (2012), p. 228.

⁹ Morgenthau Hans J in Helen Milner, "The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique.," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1991), p. 79.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 35.

Moreover, an alliance is discussed as a reward or cost and means or ends. States form alliances to counterbalance powers that are growing and restoring balance in the system. He sees alliances as a means to an end of preserving balance in the system. In his words, “*In the realist view, the historically most important manifestation of the balance of power, is to be found in the relations between one nation or alliance and another alliance.*”¹²

Kenneth Waltz suggests that the distribution of power in the international system is the main driver for alliances. Waltz suggests that states pursue security as their highest end. Power is the means of achieving security end and hence survival.¹³ Since all states are alike, their capabilities determine their position in the international system.

BoP is based on the anarchic nature of the international system. Waltz’s focus was on the interaction of states on the explanations of the recurring pattern of hostilities. It is argued that states act in the anarchic sphere, in which they cannot rely on others to protect their interests. In the absence of a world government, accepted and binding international law and world police, states adopt a hostile attitude towards one another. Anarchy generates an imperative of self-help, suggesting that a state can depend on itself alone for its survival. This leads to Waltz’s conclusion that wars ensue because of the absence of a mechanism to stop them.¹⁴ To minimise states’ impact on the danger of anarchy, circumventing dependence on other states becomes a necessity. This suggests why states are functionally similar and not differentiated, according to Waltz.

According to the BoP, states balance for two main reasons. Firstly, to stabilise the system and maintain equilibrium, countries align against the system’s most powerful state. Through this measure, states guarantee that no power dominates the international system, thereby creating a new balance. If a more capable state achieves superiority over others, the states that feel threatened by the hegemon strengthen their capabilities to oust the hegemon from its position. Undoubtedly, since nothing could prevent the hegemon

¹² Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Knopf, 1960, p.169.

¹³ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1979, p.126.

¹⁴ Waltz, Kenneth in Paul R. Viotti, Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, Fifth Edit Boston: Pearson, 2012, p. 140; Tayyar Arı, *Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorileri: Çatışma, Hegemonya, İşbirliği*, 9th ed., Bursa: Aktüel Yayınları, 2018

from using its position to maximise its interests, the disadvantaged position states would try to rearrange their relative positions. Due to the perception of insecurity and fear of the hegemon, the threatened states will attempt to rebalance the system. The assumption here is that states are considered rational; therefore, balancing against the hegemon is considered in their interest.

Secondly, weak and vulnerable states combine their ability to strengthen their influence in the system. As Waltz noted, *“We do not expect the strong to combine with the strong in order to increase the extent of their power over other... In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquillity, profit, and power. Because power is a means and not an end, states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions.”*¹⁵ States must do anything possible to protect their existence and interests; those with greater capabilities will prevail, while the least capable states remain the most vulnerable in an anarchic environment. Every state will try to maximise its security to deal with anarchy’s effect, but they will do it not on an equal basis because they have different resources to direct their efforts. For Waltz, power is seen as an essential means by which states may be in danger for having so much or less of it in neorealism. Gaining so much power by a state may ignite other states to come together by ganging against the dominant state or increasing its arms. He argues that rational state leaders try to have a suitable amount.¹⁶ As Waltz notes, *“secondary states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger side that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking.”*¹⁷

B. BALANCE OF THREAT THEORY

The balance of threat theory changed the theory of balance of power in the realist and neorealist school of international relations by separating power from the threat. In the balance of power theory, which previously dominated realist school, states balance

¹⁵ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. p. 126.

¹⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1988), p. 616.

¹⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. p. 127.

against others, whose power regarding military capabilities reflects offensive intentions. Reformulating the concept of balance of power will expand the explanatory possibilities of the structural realist theory, argues Walt. For example, one can study how military-political alliances are formed, how large and small states choose their allies and patrons. Alliances are one of the means to compensate for external threats to states (in addition to mobilising and building up their power). An alliance is “*a formal or informal arrangement of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.*”¹⁸

1. Reasons for Alignment According to Balance of Threat

According to Walt, the rise of power of a state or coalition of states is not the reason for alliance formation. Opposing BoPs proposition that power is the causal factor for alliances, Walt suggests that states balance against threats influenced by aggregate power, aggressive intention, offensive capability, and states’ geographic proximity. Accordingly, although the distribution of power is significant, the balance of threat theory posits that states will not balance against those who rise in power but those that show offensive intentions, which depends on threat perception, geographical proximity, and ability to attack. Consequently, states form alliances to balance against the threat and not the rise in a state’s power. For a more accurate understanding of how states evaluate threats by other states, Walt suggests keeping in mind the totality of all the factors that form threat discussed in detail below:

a. Aggregate Power

This is the totality of resources such as population, economy, military strength, technological prowess, etc., at a state’s disposal. Unlike other neo-realists, Walt considers aggregate power as a state’s capacity to theoretically challenge another state due to its possession of a larger population, infrastructure, industrial and military capabilities.¹⁹ Due to unequal components that states posse and the anarchic nature of the international system, states cannot be positive whether a dominant state utilises its resources against it as such, form alliances in order to create a balance in the system.²⁰ The larger a state regarding its resources, the higher the potential threat it poses for other states. These

¹⁸ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 12.

¹⁹ Richard Nere, "Democracy Promotion and the U. S. National Security Strategy: US National Interest, US Primacy, and Coercion," *Strategic Insights*, vol. VIII, no. 3 (2009), p. 4.

²⁰ Stephen M. Walt, "Keeping the World Off Balance: Self Restraint and US Foreign Policy," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2005, p. 20, doi:10.2139/ssrn.253799.

elements of power, if necessary, are transformed into the military component. While power is a potential threat, Walt suggests, in some circumstances, it can still be valued as states with higher capacity may use their strength to target adversaries or compensate their partners. Therefore, the combined power of a state constitutes a reason other states opt for balancing against or joining the threat source.²¹

Once faced with an external threat, the state's choice to balance rests on how it is possible to do so successfully. Weak states that cannot influence an outcome can choose to support the eventual winner in any way possible. Walt also points out that when a hegemon seems unchallengeable, many states tend not to balance because it could encourage the hegemon to concentrate its strategic advantages on them. While this argument contradicts the neo-realist interpretation, Walt suggests, it does not contradict the theory. As Kenneth Waltz contends, states should pursue self-help strategies for their sustainability in an anarchic system. Conversely, balancing may not be a reasonable approach to survival, and sometimes bandwagoning may be healthier.²²

b. Geographical Proximity

Since the power projection ability of states and threat decreases with distance, states pay more attention to threats from neighbouring states than from remote countries. Therefore, balancing or bandwagon behaviours may be affected by proximity in the manner of aggregate power. To put it differently, when making alliance choices, states consider nearby powers than distant ones; a balancing behaviour by a nearby strong state can activate an alliance to contain the threat perceived. Walt averred that "Small states bordering a great power may be so vulnerable that they choose to bandwagon rather than balance, especially if a powerful neighbour has demonstrated its ability to compel obedience."²³

c. Offensive Power

This is part of the aggregate power that is directly mobilised to carry out a military task. It is expressed in the ability to harm another state's territorial integrity and sovereignty with acceptable costs. The larger the offensive capability of a state, the more likelihood of provoking alliance and vice versa. Offensive power has not been so easy to

²¹ *ibid.* p. 23.

²² Walt, "Keeping the World Off Balance: Self Restraint and US Foreign Policy," pp. 21-2.

²³ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. pp. 23-24.

measure because it relies on a state's capacity to convert its aggregate power for offensive use while altering the offence defence balance in its favour.²⁴ The challenge of separating offensive and defensive capability is best expressed in the security dilemma definition, which states that states take measures to improve their security trigger responses from other states. This, in effect, contributes to a decrease rather than an improvement in its security. And where offensive and defensive capabilities are similar, states cannot be confident about their actual purposes.²⁵ According to David Priess, political propaganda, espionage, terrorism, or subversion in other countries' matters might constitute threats as substantial as traditional military actions.²⁶ The offensive power may lead other states to opt for a policy of balance or bandwagoning, just like other sources of threat.²⁷ Therefore, a threatening state possessing more offensive power is more likely to cause balancing behaviours. Nevertheless, as the offensive power caused other states to be overwhelmed, states with lesser capabilities are discouraged from resisting because their allies could not easily help them; it may be obliged to select bandwagoning as a policy. The motivation of balancing declines, on the other hand, "when a state can defend its territory but cannot attack others with high confidence."²⁸

d. Aggressive Intentions of States

Unlike aggregate power, offensive capability, and geographical proximity, the aggressive intention of a state is perceptual, which especially finds expression in states' foreign policy. The aggressive intentions of states can cause other countries to balance against them as a result. Here, the intentions of states play an essential role in choosing allies. Balancing occurs as a result of their perception of the aggressiveness of a given state.²⁹ States considered hostile are likely to encourage balancing behaviour. A state's aggregate power is not as essential as the understanding of its intentions. While aggregate power is important, states' offensive intentions shape a state's perception of

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1993), p. 28, doi:10.1080/00396339308442672.

²⁶ David Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study," *Security Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1996), pp. 143–71, doi:10.1080/09636419608429291.

²⁷ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 25.

²⁸ Walt, "Keeping the World Off Balance: Self Restraint and US Foreign Policy," p. 25.

²⁹ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 25.

aggressiveness.³⁰ Corroborating Walt, Gregory Gause avers that neighbour's accumulation of power which may be highly threatening is not a strong indicator of a threat than a neighbouring state whose power is not as considerable but uses subversive and rhetorical weapons against a given state. States have to genuinely balance threats, determining if the possible risk of military attack from a neighbouring state is more imminent than a direct threat to regime security that is caused by a "*weaker opponent seeking to delegitimise as well as destabilise the regime*".³¹

Aggressive intentions play a crucial role in states alignment behaviours. If one state is deemed unchangingly violent, the others do not want bandwagoning, as they look nonsensical. In such situations, weaker states may be victims though they bandwagon with their source of threat.³² Walt points to a complete picture of factors states consider in making alliances by deciding balancing and bandwagoning in terms of threats rather than power alone and indicating other variables that influence threat perceptions.³³ However, while it is toilsome to determine which source of threat played the major role, all the variables would probably be important. As Walt stressed, "*One cannot determine a priori, however, which source of threat will be most important in any given case, one can say only that all of them are likely to play a role.*"³⁴ A threatened states propensity to balance intensifies as the magnitude of the threat increases.³⁵ Balancing is safer for states that face external challenges than bandwagoning, and there is a prevailing inclination to balance, Walt noted. He discovered that, from 1955 until 1979, of the 36 alliances in the Middle East, 87.5% were against hostile states with aggressive intentions. The number of bandwagon choices with dangerous states, however, stood at 12.5% merely.³⁶

³⁰ Nere, "Democracy Promotion and the U. S. National Security Strategy: US National Interest, US Primacy, and Coercion," p. 4.

³¹ F. Gregory Gause, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf," *Security Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2003), p. 275, doi:10.1080/09636410490521271.

³² Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

³³ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1985), p. 13, doi:10.2307/2538540.

³⁴ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 26.

³⁵ Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," pp. 3–43.

³⁶ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

2. How States Deal with Threats: “Balancing versus Bandwagoning”

The behaviour of states that may translate to military expenditures, alliances, and participating in international regimes, forming commercial relations with other states, is mainly the consequence of the threats they perceive in their immediate environment. The main aim of states is to balance the threats they perceive. While threat perceptions of states are mainly the outcome of the asymmetry of power, Walt suggests that in an anarchic environment, a state can perceive a threat from its neighbour due to its possession of elements such as aggregate power, aggressive intention, offensive power.³⁷ Hence, threat perception precipitates balancing acts by states. Walt suggests that balancing behaviour predominates while stressing the perception of threat in his debate on “balancing versus bandwagoning.”

Walt suggested that balancing and bandwagoning are the models of state behaviours in alliance formation. An imbalance of threat leads states to work internally or to join alliances to lessen their weakness.³⁸ In this case, states either balance against the states posing threats to them by aligning with other less powerful and not threatening states or bandwagon with the sources of threat to their existence. In the Middle East, as Walt submits, balancing can be “*conducted by military means for particular military ends and [...] political means directed at an opponent’s image and legitimacy.*”³⁹ This was evident when the states were balancing against pan-Arabism which can be considered purely ideological. Therefore, the balance of threat theory elucidates the reasons behind bandwagoning with a source of threat. In practical terms, threatened nations align with big states to deal with the threats they perceive.⁴⁰

Bandwagoning is more often resorted to in case of a threat of a much superior enemy.⁴¹ Balancing tactics are more regular and provide a more stable international environment because it does not increase the threat’s potential source. Under certain circumstances, however, states resort to an alliance with the source of threats. As Walt states, “*If balancing is more common than bandwagoning, then states are more secure*

³⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

³⁸ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 269.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.* pp. 175-6.

⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 17.

because aggressors will face combined opposition. Status quo states should therefore avoid provoking countervailing coalitions by eschewing threatening foreign and defense policies."⁴² Typically, an alliance with the threat's source occurs when a weak state wants to avoid being defeated by a stronger adversary when there is no hope for allies, or if during a war, the country stood with the defeated.

3. Reasons for Bandwagoning Behaviour by States

The balance of threat theory suggests some conditions that make bandwagoning possible. Walt suggests that it is more likely that weak states will bandwagon than strong nations. Moreover, bandwagoning is feasible if potential allies are not obtainable. Finally, threatening states that may seem to be appeased may be able to spur bandwagoning behaviour.⁴³

a. Weak and Powerful States

Weak states are likely to opt for bandwagoning due to their inability to alter the balance effectively. Consequently, it is reasonable for weak states to choose the side that is likely to win. Strong states that can alter the threat they perceive rationally choose balancing as a strategy on the contrary.⁴⁴ Vulnerable states that are located close to threatening states raises the likelihood to balance. Small states neighbouring or adjacent to a major power are most prone to bandwagon, particularly when a threatening country's offensive capacities allow for instantaneous conquest. At the same time, they are likely to balance when faced with an adversary of similar capabilities.⁴⁵

b. The Accessibility of Allies

Typically, while it is rational for states to balance other states' threat through internal efforts, it is not realistic for weak states as their balancing efforts come with reliable foreign support. In this regard, Walt argues that "*excessive confidence in allied support will encourage weak states to free ride, relying on the efforts to others to provide security*", which is most favourable for the weak states.⁴⁶ For aligning, identifying mutual

⁴² Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," p. 4.

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 173.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* pp. 29-30.

⁴⁵ Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," p. 12.

⁴⁶ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances.* p. 30.

interest is extremely important; states lacking an “*effective system of diplomatic communication*” mechanism should agree to consider the most endangering power.⁴⁷

c. The Effect of Intentions

When a threatening state appears to be more likely to be appeased, states are more prone to opt for bandwagon because the anticipation drives that it will moderate the threatening state’s assertive intentions.⁴⁸ For instance, two USA neighbours opted to bandwagon with the US since its policy has been benevolent.⁴⁹ However, quite the opposite is seen in the Soviet’s obstinately hostile motives, which caused Iran and Turkey to balance, even when they were not confident outside support.⁵⁰

Walt’s hypotheses relating to bandwagoning and balancing are conceivably crucial in that we can take hold of numerous elements of alignment strategies by states.⁵¹ It is noteworthy that regarding war and peacetime, Walt proposes a fourth condition that accommodates bandwagoning. In peacetime, Walt indicates that countries are more disposed to balancing behaviours. Nevertheless, in wartime, and particularly as soon, as a result, is positive, some countries will bandwagon with the winning side to hand out the reward of conquest. Yet, the restoration of peace stimulates balancing behaviour once more.⁵² Considering the above, balancing tends to be more desirable than bandwagoning. Walt additionally offers conditions favouring bandwagoning.

C. APPLICABILITY OF STRUCTURAL THEORIES

The BoP theorists made significant contributions towards understanding the formation of alliances. Conventionally, Iraq and Iran were the primary threat to the status quo-oriented Gulf monarchies. The 1979 revolution in Iran and the subsequent war that ensued between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s underscore the Gulf states’ threats from their more potent neighbours. According to the BoP theory’s logic states that weaker states ally to balance a stronger state. Iran and Iraq are both strong militarily. Their population is as

⁴⁷ *ibid.* pp. 30-1.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 176.

⁴⁹ Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” p. 36.

⁵⁰ Stephen M. Walt, “Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia on JSTOR,” *International Organization*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1988), pp. 275–316, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706677?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁵¹ See: *ibid.* pp 32-33 for hypotheses on balancing and bandwagoning.

⁵² *ibid.* p. 31.

well bigger than that of all the states in the Gulf. For that reason, it can be said that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain came together to balance Iranian power.

Indeed, the threat perception of Iran and Iraq pushed all the countries to engage in both internal and external efforts to complement stronger nations' power, as the balance of power theorist will suggest. Therefore, the Arab Gulf states increase their military strength as well as engage in alliances both within and outside the region to counterbalance the strength of their enemies. Accordingly, as external balancing of the BoP suggests, states that are threatened align with external powers to increase their military strength against the threatening state, the states align themselves with the US to counterbalance Iran. Since alliances come with arms transfer, the Gulf countries threatened by Iran stepped up their military expenditure to balance Iran's power. Given that all the countries in the Gulf are in alliance both within and outside the region, it can be said that the BoP theory's assertions have fared well. However, it remains diminutive for understanding the complexities of the relationship between threat perception and states' foreign policy behaviours. The theory left out unit-level idiosyncrasies peculiar to each of the states, such as demographic content of a state, economic status, nature, and level of threat perceptions, which may play a role in how a state responds to a threat.

From the BoT theory, the security behaviour of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain towards Iran and Iraq should primarily reflect a combination of aggregate power and perception of intent and the offence-defence balance and geographic proximity. While the Iran-Iraq War ended with no winner, it may be argued that both Iran and Iraq enjoyed a superiority of aggregate power against the rest of the states in the Gulf. Looking through the balance of threat lens, we will not expect states to balance Iraq and Iran because of their relative power alone. It should be expected that the power of the two aggressive neighbours creates an incentive to balance.

Accordingly, the theory of BoT will suggest that states in the Gulf form alliances primarily to counter the threats perceived emanating from Iraq during Saddam's period and Iran since the Islamic revolution in 1979 as a result of the countries aggressive intentions and not as a response to change in the balance of power. Iran's aggregate power declined from 1978 to late 1980, yet, there is an increase in the threat perceived from Tehran, principally attributed to its role in subverting regimes in the Gulf. The Gulf states

that make the GCC decided to align to fight the great threat to their security, which is the subversion instigated by Iran.⁵³

Supposed potential allies of a state are approximately equal in strength; then, by the theory of balance of threats, states conclude an alliance with the least dangerous side.⁵⁴ Iran's military capability declined following the revolution and its inaccessibility of spare parts for its military equipment supplied by the US during the Shahs reign.⁵⁵ Iran is seen as more threatening due to its aggressive intentions. During the Iran-Iraq War, the other Gulf countries that are not part of the war were on the side of Iraq even though Iraq is stronger because they see subversive and aggressive Iran as more threatening to them.⁵⁶ The revolution ignited Islamist identities in the Arab Gulf monarchs, particularly among the Shiites with links to the Islamic republic.

Additionally, the Islamic republic intentionally stirs up unrest in the Gulf states by way of propaganda and support for dissidents.⁵⁷ Iran made Saddam appear less threatening to the GCC states, yet they never trusted Iraq as well feared his intentions. From the global perspectives, the US worked against Iran not because Iran was stronger, but because it felt Iran is more threatening than Iraq.⁵⁸

With Iraq reduced to the sphere of Iranian influence as a corollary of the US invasion in 2003 and the Arab uprising in the Gulf which started in 2011, and Iran's ability to utilise the situation on the ground to its favour. The BoT illustrates, in particular, on the example of the Gulf how Iran is perceived by all of the countries bordering it as a significant threat not because it is the largest geographically and most powerful state militarily in the Gulf but because it utilises aggressive subversion, as a tool against the Gulf states which constitute more danger to the Gulf states. Since the Islamic revolution, its rhetoric has been on the exportation of its revolution and as well as supporting Shia

⁵³ Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study," p. 169.

⁵⁴ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 264.

⁵⁵ Michael Barnett, R Gregory III Gause, "Caravans in Opposite Directions: Society, State and the Development of a Community in the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Security Communities*, ed. by Emanuel Adler, Michael Barnett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 161–97, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511598661.005.

⁵⁶ Steve Yetiv, "The Travails of Balance of Power Theory: The United States in the Middle East," *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2006), pp. 70–105, doi:10.1080/09636410600666279.

⁵⁷ Cooper, "State-Centric Balance-of-Threat Theory: Explaining the Misunderstood Gulf Cooperation Council," p. 320.

⁵⁸ Yetiv, "The Travails of Balance of Power Theory: The United States in the Middle East," pp. 70–105.

groups in other GCC states. These were perceived by the states as deliberate aggressiveness of intentions, also carrying a threat.⁵⁹

Moreover, the Gulf states' industrial base and weapon technology are far from meeting the production need for security. As such, the countries engage in foreign arms procurement efforts to complement the threats they perceive. Therefore, the states' instinct to survive in a dangerous environment suggests that the states should secure and maintain friendly relations with great power security patrons. Alignment strategy is one option available to states if they want to augment their security challenge and counterbalance threats from their dangerous neighbours. The other internal option involves improving the military of a state by building arms. While both decisions can improve a country's security, they can equally reduce its security in the sense that a country joining an alliance may reduce its security to the ambition of its ally, while building arms can induce other states to view that as threatening to their security thus provoking them to take a similar gesture. Alliances come with arms transfer sometimes as a form of military aid from other countries to obviate threat countries perceive.⁶⁰ Arms transfers strengthen the deterrent consequence of alliance by making the ally far more able to, at the very least holding off would-be aggressors before reinforcements arrive.⁶¹

Due to the threats they perceive from Iran, the GCC member states applied various strategies to feel secure. By aligning themselves with the US and the West, the GCC member states engaged in diversifying positions, base access agreements and arms transfer to mitigate the threat they perceive from Iran. Arms transfer plays a significant role in securing the states by guaranteeing a superpower security umbrella.⁶² The acceptance of the United States as a security guarantor by the Arab Gulf states may suggest that their arms may not be just for defence; instead, it is about paying for the security guarantee. The procurement of weapons from the US by the Arab Gulf countries

⁵⁹ Victoria Chen, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Sectarianism, a Quest for Regional Hegemony, and International Alignments," 2017, p. 34.

https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstonehttps://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/1000.

⁶⁰ James D. Morrow, "Arms Versus Allies: Trade-Offs in the Search for Security," *International Organization*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1993), p. 213.

⁶¹ Keren Yarhi-Milo, Alexander Lanoszka, Zack Cooper, "To Arm or to Ally? The Patron's Dilemma and the Strategic Logic of Arms Transfers and Alliances," *International Security*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2016), p. 100, doi:10.1162/ISEC.

⁶² Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe," *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, Boston: Springer, 1998, pp. 13–31, doi:10.1007/978-1-4757-2832-3_2.

allows them to feel they can defend their territories. In other words, it can be said that the countries are paying for the rent of US protection. Arms build-up in the Arab Gulf states has to do with the US intrigue in the region, and if there is any conflict with Iran, the US is expected to come in via its fifth fleet located in Bahrain.⁶³

The BoT compared to BoP undoubtedly, provides a better lens for the understanding of how threat perception impacts on military and non-military efforts of the Gulf states to balance the threats they perceive. The theory shows how states respond to threats, i.e., the occurrence of a situation where one state or coalition becomes especially dangerous. In this case, states form alliances or increase their internal efforts to reduce their vulnerability. Walt avers that the balance of threat theory enhanced the balance of power theory by improving its explanatory power to equally parsimonious provisions. Using the theory of the balance of threats, we can understand those events that cannot be elucidated by only concentrating on the mere distribution of power.⁶⁴

While discussing the superiority of BoT over BoP theory, Walt acknowledged Steven David's contribution to the alliance literature. In his words, *"by focusing on power alone, balance-of-power theory overlooks the fact that domestic threats may provide an important motive for alignment. Although external threats were probably more important, domestic concerns also encouraged Pakistan and Iran to seek US support. As Steven David has suggested, regime stability and personal survival rank high on the agendas of many Third World leaders. Balance-of-Threat theory can accommodate this possibility—that is, states seek allies to counter both internal and external threats, whichever is imminent—but balance-of-power theory cannot."*⁶⁵

While Walt's theory can be attuned to the argument that states ally to counter both internal and external threats, the theory does not provide a better understanding of the leaders' motive. As a result, the theory will still lag because it does not explain whether regime survival or otherwise is the primary driver of alliances in developing countries.

⁶³ Jared Malsin, "Paying the Rent for Our Protectors," *Aljazeera America*, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/8/17/-paying-the-rentforourprotectors.html>.

⁶⁴ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy: A Reply to Kaufmann and Labs," *Security Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1992), pp. 448–82, doi:10.1080/09636419209347478.

⁶⁵ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation in SouthWest Asia: Balancing and Bandwagoning in Cold War Competition," *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*, ed. by Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 71.

Moreover, it fails to explain the impact of unit-level characteristics such as demographics, economy, level, and nature of threat perception on their alliance choices.

II. THE THEORY OF OMNIBALANCING

To shed more light on the states' alignment behaviours in the Third World, the theories discussed above seem less relevant, argued Steven David,⁶⁶ and Michael Barnett and Jack Levy.⁶⁷ Traditional alignment literature is mainly American and Eurocentric and focuses on mainly external threats to analyse states' alliance behaviours and, for that reason, overlooks the importance of Third World states.⁶⁸ David's argument was premised on the inadequacy of IR theories in explaining alignment behaviours in the Third World. As William Wohlforth also suggested, structural realism is less applicable "*even when we add conditional variables to the theory to derive more discrete hypotheses, it fails to add much to the explanation...*" while working on the applicability of the structural realist theories on alignment behaviours of the states that were part of the Soviet Union.⁶⁹

The systemic theories are found to be wanting in correctly explaining the alignment choices of the Third World countries due to their view of dichotomy existing in anarchy at the international level and internal stability. Mohammed Ayoob gave insight into why relying on external threats to analyse the Third World is undependable, suggesting that insecurity in the Third World mainly emanates from the domestic environment than from the external milieu. Against the background of the insecurity states face from the domestic arena, the external threats hardly attain salience.⁷⁰ What makes the Third World, according to David, is the existential nature of the threat the regimes perceive from within their boundaries. When making an alignment decision, the

⁶⁶ Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*, vol. 43, no. 2 (1991), pp. 233–56, doi:10.2307/2010472.

⁶⁷ Michael N. Barnett, Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962–73," *International Organization*, vol. 45, no. 3 (1991), pp. 369–95, doi:10.1017/S0020818300033142.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ William C. Wohlforth, "Revisiting Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia," *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. by T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, Fortman Michael, California: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 232.

⁷⁰ Mohammed Ayoob, "The Security Problematic of the Third World," *National and International Security*, Princeton University Press, 2018, vol. 308, pp. 247–73, doi:10.2307/2010473.

above features mainly found in weak states are left out by the systemic theories, rendering the theories less applicable to the Third World.

A. OMNIBALANCING VERSUS STRUCTURAL THEORIES

The Omnibalancing theory shares the core assumptions of the structural theories (i.e., BoP and BoT) explanation of alignment while making some alterations to fit the Third World. The structural theories suggested that it is the structure of the international system that determine threat perceptions of states. In contrast, the internal character of states is important in making alignment choices by states. Since the alignment theories discussed above see the state as a unitary actor, the presence of adversaries in the domestic domain of most regimes as a threat to its survival in the Third World is left out.

Nevertheless, David shares balance of powers focuses on international politics, which pay more attention to anarchy where states interests cause conflict; power; rationality and resistance of threat/power, yet differs in the reason for alignment. As David puts it, “...*the most powerful determinant of Third World alignment behavior is the rational calculation of Third World leaders as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep them in power.*” This suggests that leaders in the developing countries will balance the threat they face from both the domestic and external milieu instead of structural theories that emphasized external threats. A state’s security is affected by both internal and external threats as Mohammed Ayoob noted, “*Security or insecurity is defined in relation to vulnerabilities, both internal and external, that threaten to, or have the potential to, bring down or significantly weaken state structures, both territorial and institutional, and regimes.*”⁷¹

Omnibalancing also accepts the existence of hierarchy in the international system of which survival is the key to states and the law of human nature that regulates politics, in which the survivability of leaders is considered paramount. Since survival is primary when making alignment choices in the Third World, when deciding, a leader will ask himself, “*how does this policy affect the probability of my remaining in power?*”⁷² instead

⁷¹ Mohammed Ayoob, “Defining Security: A Subaltern Realist Perspective,” *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, ed. by Keith Krause, Michael C. Williams, London: UCL Press UCL, n.d., p. 130, doi:10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004.

⁷² David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” p. 238.

of the assumption of the structuralist theories that assume leaders respond according to the national interest.

Omnibalancing theory did not agree with the assumption that the states are acting unitarily to serve their national interests. BoP suggests anarchy resulting from a lack of overarching authority to mediate relations in the international system while serenity exists in the domestic arena. This argument is flawed and does not hold when it comes to the states in the Third World. Because the states are weak, they mostly fail to mediate between the factions within a state, making it a player in the domestic arena due to the state's weakness and opposition strength. This *modus operandi* is likened to the anarchy in the international system. As in the international arena, the nature of the Third World is characterised by anarchy in the domestic arena conditioned by internal disputes and weak institutions manifesting in a military coup, insurgency and sometimes opposition groups all making an effort to take control of the state. In short, omnibalancing did not agree with BoPs view of states as coherent units with hierarchy in domestic politics and overarching authority over a defined sovereign territory. Due to anarchy in the domestic arena of the Third World states, defining them in the way of BoP will mean that an important analytical variable is left out in explaining the states' alignment choices as the regimes focus on their interest and not on the state. While BoP assumes that states' primary concern is survival in an anarchic international arena and as such amass power to gain the end of survival, in omnibalancing, the primary actors that seek survival are some elites controlling the regimes and not states in the Third World. Since regime survival is of priority to the Third World leaders, they balance against their primary threat within the state they rule.

B. REASONS FOR ALIGNMENT POLICIES ACCORDING TO OMNIBALANCING THEORY

The key determinant of alignment in the Third World is the leaders desire to remain in power as seen when making alignment choices; they look for an external power that is ready to help them maintain their grip on power.⁷³ Third World leaders balance threats they face in the domestic arena by aligning with an external power to have material benefits such as military aid and sometimes direct security assistance. Deborah Larson

⁷³ *ibid.*

further explains why the leaders choose external powers to balance the threats. Leaders opt for bandwagoning because of three interrelated variables of identity, legitimacy, and adaptability. Identity plays an important role in determining the foreign policy outcome of weak states. Since states represent societies' collective identity, having a unique national character that represents cultural values and ideology that gives citizens a means of identification, popular identification with a state will show the acceptance of its authority. When there is a lack of harmony between domestic institutions and national identity, citizens tend to be loyal to classes, ethnic, political and religious groups.⁷⁴ This leads to a lack of identification with a given state and hence affects states' foreign policy choices. Within the state, groups align themselves with external powers to advance their struggle against the state. The political elite in such states sees the groups' actions as an obvious threat to the regime's survival. Since the elites are not instrumentally attached to the state, they do not hesitate in aligning with a stronger external power ready to assist them in safeguarding their prerogative.⁷⁵

The presence of ethnic division does not mean that a state is likely to ally with a stronger hostile state. What causes such an alignment is the lack of unity between the state and national identity.⁷⁶ When there are problems of identity and legitimacy in a state, the state leaders will normally resist anything that will bring about the restructuring of the state because doing so will go against their interest in remaining in power. Since the elites in weak states are unlikely to change themselves, they fail to deal with resistance and or even appease their enemies from within.⁷⁷ The problem of legitimacy may not come from political opposition to the regime as Eric Miller and Arkady Toritsyn noted, "*the real concern for leaders is not the presence of political opposition per se, but the presence of a deep crisis of legitimacy that gives rise to a galvanising opposition leader or party, which may then pose a threat to the leader's ability to hold on to power.*" The

⁷⁴ Deborah Welch Larson, "Bandwagoning Images in American Foreign Policy: Myth or Reality?," *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*, ed. by Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 91.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 94.

consequence of a weak economy is the loss of legitimacy, thereby “galvanising opposition forces” which may be nonviolent but capable of bringing about regime change.⁷⁸

States in the Third World are weak. For that reason, the leadership is unable to carry out its duty of regulating different factions, making the domestic arena as anarchic as the international system. Given that most of the Third World states were artificially created by colonialists, there is a lack of common idea of a state among various religious, ethnic groups, etc. Therefore, loyalty among citizens is tied to specific groups competing for dominance against the group controlling the state. Since rules are draconian and, in most cases, act against the competing groups, the groups tend to seek foreign support. The countries supporting adversaries to the regime do so to influence the domestic outcome of the state. On the other hand, the regime searches for foreign powers readily available to assist it in dealing with the internal challenges but, with the main goal of maintaining power as the groups pose existential threats to the regime.

Moreover, most of the Third World countries are ruled by some selected few and authoritarian regimes. Therefore, the foreign policy of the states is managed by a group of few elites. In such a situation, the leaders align with the countries that are ready to help them deal with their rivals as the loss of power is costly because it will mean all privileges tied to the power will be lost. This brings us to the legitimacy problem the leaders face. The legitimacy problem is mostly tied to how leaders come to power in the Third World. In many of the countries, the leaders came to the throne through the seizure of power by military or revolution and elections that are far from free or fair, thus, the problem of collective identity. This lack of collective identity in a state leads to a problem of legitimacy as a result, and they are not widely accepted by the society they govern. The leaders peruse other ways of gaining public consent, such as palliatives or arousing patriotic sentiments. The leaders also try to hide under an expanding ideological movement such as popular irredentist movements to return lost territories as a strategy for strengthening its domestic appeal.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Eric A. Miller, Arkady Toritsyn, *Bringing the Leader Back in: Internal Threats and Alignment Theory in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, *Security Studies*, 2004, p. 335.

⁷⁹ Larson, “Bandwagoning Images in American Foreign Policy: Myth or Reality?” p. 93.

C. OMNIBALANCING THEORY ADJUSTS THE BALANCE OF POWER THEORY

As stated earlier, the theory put forth by David acknowledged some of the BoPs assumptions but modified some to match his case study, which is the Third World. Regarding the way countries facing both internal and external threats, David made some amends to the systemic theories as follows:

Firstly, rather than just balancing against external threats or power, leaders will align with the states posing a threat. In other words, they will align with their secondary external opponent to focus their resources inward to weaken the main threat they face in their internal environment.⁸⁰ This usually means appeasing other states to contain the main domestic threats that are immediate and dangerous. Put differently, to feel safe and strong in the domestic realm; leaders align with the power supporting opposition to appease it to desist from supporting hostility within its territory.⁸¹ This argument is in concomitance with Larson's postulation that since the elites in states with weak institutions aim to maintain their power, they are likely to bandwagon with a threatening state. By aligning with a stronger state with hegemonic ambition, the elite establishes their power to rule the state as the foreign state ends its subversive activities.⁸² This implies the presence of a serious domestic threat to the regime.

Secondly, leaders align with external powers "*to counter the more immediate and dangerous domestic threat. They seek to split the alignment against them and focus their energies on their most dangerous (domestic) opponents.*" This suggests that the internal threat is perceived as more dangerous to regime survival than the threat emanating from the external environment.

Lastly, the main goal of leaders in the Third World is to stay in power. Since their main goal is never to relinquish their power, they chose strategies that often go against the state's interest. In other words, the leaders are more concerned about policies that affect their survivability than those affecting the institution of the state they govern. As

⁸⁰ Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

⁸¹ Larson, "Bandwagoning Images in American Foreign Policy: Myth or Reality?" pp. 85–111.

⁸² *ibid.* p. 102-103.

David puts it, “when a leadership is confronted with a choice between aligning so as to benefit the state, but endangering its hold on power, it will choose the latter.”⁸³

D. STRATEGIES USED BY LEADERS TO MAINTAIN THEIR POWER

For leaders to maintain their grip on power, omnibalancing is applied as a strategy to deal with threats emanating from external powers, the challenge of establishing and promoting an ideology to gain legitimacy, and rising opposition from within the polity.⁸⁴ While regimes utilise internal strategies to deal with their threat perceptions, the nature of internal threats regimes faces give them incentives to prefer an external ally to deal with their domestic adversaries.⁸⁵ In other words, alignment with an external power may give the regime the necessary resources to alleviate its internal threats. In addition, regimes may be swift in forming alignment “to provide security guarantees in response to an immediate security threat and can be discarded if necessary when the threat recedes.”⁸⁶ While discussing the reason why states prefer alignment to internal efforts to ward off threats, Michael Barnett and Jack S Levy suggested that, “Military spending can also reduce a state’s ability to satisfy important domestic welfare goals in the short term as well as the long term (the guns–butter trade-off), and the inability to satisfy these goals at some minimal level can generate social discontent and undermine political support for the regime in power.”⁸⁷

Due to the fragility in the legitimacy of regimes, stability may usually depend on the use of rent for cementing client networks, appeasing the army, etc. The foreign policy of states that depend on oil rents for survival will most likely be driven by maintaining their survival.⁸⁸ State strengthening can be stimulated by external threats, which bring the possibility of centralising and strengthening a state’s security elites within the regime.⁸⁹ This, however, differs from David’s assertion that internal threats spur alignment. For

⁸³ David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World*. p. 236.

⁸⁴ Robert Olson, “Kurdish Nationalism, State Formation and Capital Accumulation in Kurdistan Iraq,” *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. by Mohammed M. A. Ahmed, Michael M. Gunter, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2007, pp. 188 – 90.

⁸⁵ Barnett, Levy, “Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-73,” p. 370.

⁸⁶ *ibid.* p. 374.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* pp. 375-376.

⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 19.

⁸⁹ Anoushiravan. Ehteshami, Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, Routledge, 1997, p. 17.

Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, external threats and leadership factors shape alignment behaviours in Third World regimes that are consolidated.⁹⁰ Yet, to defend themselves against internal and external threats and maintain their grip on power while improving their countries standing in the international sphere, leaders engage in any kind of measure readily available to them as per alignment is concerned.⁹¹ As they noted, *“where external threats are real, they may precipitate a greater than average internal strengthening of the state; this could permit a more effective foreign policy which, while not ignoring the requisites of internal legitimacy or economic constraints, could still focus on managing the external arena.”* In short, modernisation and consolidation policies and foreign investment and trade relations enlargement as variables were introduced to the literature.⁹²

Moreover, the leaders employ state resources such as secret police, electoral malpractices to their favour, detaining opposition leaders, and suppressing opposition and media outlets. While these tactics may isolate regimes from some of their partners, especially in the West, they may turn to their key external threat for support.⁹³

E. APPLICABILITY OF OMNIBALANCING THEORY TO THE CASE

Omnibalancing theory created a helpful contribution to balancing strategies of the Gulf as the states have attributes of the Third World states David surveyed. Moreover, all the states have weak domestic institutions examined by Larson. These contributions might well help in understanding the response of the state to threats they perceive. The continuing importance of perceptions in the theoretical work on alliance formation is emphasised. In David’s postulation, perceptions of which other country is willing to assist a leader in protecting his power are unmistakable. In addition to material and structural elements, the significance of perceptual elements is a recurring mention in the literature on alliance formation.

The theory put forth by Steven David fits like a glove to the cases, especially when explaining the threat in the internal milieu that have links to the external environment.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, p. 197.

⁹¹ *ibid*

⁹² *ibid*. p. 98.

⁹³ *ibid*, p. 337.

The threat perceptions of the leaders come from within and outside the borders of the states they rule. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain face both internal and external threats to their survival. Since the Arab Uprisings, the core of states' security agenda is said to have shifted to the internal threat perception and regime survival. It is important to note that even before the Arab Uprisings, the states under study perceive internal and external threats to their survival. While internal threats to the states existed before the Arab Uprisings, the turmoil increased the magnitude of the internal threat perceptions, making it more prevalent than the external threats, thus making regime survival key to the leaders balancing act. The states perceive more threats in their internal environment due to its link to the external milieu. Moreover, the threat is directed to the regime and not the state hence affecting their stability. More threatening to the leaders was how pro-democracy and pro-reform demonstrators brought down regimes from Cairo to Tripoli.

Omnibalancing considers authoritarian state leaders rather than the state itself because these leaders are concerned with staying in power. David avers that *"it is the state leadership of the state and not the state itself that is the proper unit of analysis for understanding Third World foreign policy, particularly alignment."* Indeed, when it comes to the alignment strategies of the states, the regime is more emphasized. Therefore, omnibalancing offers the most promising lens to grasp how the leaders balance their primary threat perceptions.

The leader's foreign policy behaviours are driven by the need to maintain the security of their regime. Since the Arab Spring, the states' leaders took various measures that include internal and external to reverse the effect of the Arab Uprisings on their stay in power. The leaders dealt with protesters through crackdown and government palliative measures to buy support from the internal environment.

Intervention in the form of counterrevolution in Egypt (through sponsoring of a coup against the Muhammad Mursi led Muslim Brotherhood government), Libya (against Gadhafi and later the internationally recognised Government of National Accord), Syria (against the Bashar al-Asad regime, which is seen as a key ally to Iran and a link between Iran and Hezbollah), Yemen (against the Houthi rebels yet supported by Iran, their main adversary in the Gulf) etc. was carried out by the states to deal with the threats they perceived from the effect of the uprisings. Moreover, the regimes took various measures,

including shoring up their allies and economic aid in billions to Bahrain and Oman to foil the threats impacting their survival.

The GCC was created to help the Arab monarchs maintain their power via economic and security means.⁹⁴ Within this framework, the Arab Uprisings (which magnified the already existing internal dissents) and Iran, which supported the uprisings, threatened the stability and sometimes survival of the Arab Gulf monarchies. There is no doubt that the Gulf states are weak, and their weakness does not come from a lack of resources but from the inability of the states to provide some portions of their population with their basic needs. As a result, we have seen the Arab uprising in most of the states. The notion that states balance against threats to their regime and the threat from outside sits well in the Gulf. For example, in 2011, to save the Bahraini regime, the GCC due to the similar threat they face both within and outside their territory utilised its Peninsular Shield Force to stepped in and save the regime as it is threatened by a protest which it sees as instigated with the support of Iran given Bahrain's majority Shia population. This move is seen as a defensive act against an external actor (Iran) due to interfering in the GCC states' affairs. The move also aims at dispelling the worry that the protest may snowball to other GCC member states.⁹⁵

While the theories give us insight, especially in the nature of threats regimes face and the balancing acts likely to be undertaken, they fall short in explaining why states in a similar geography and share similar threat perceptions acted differently. What then explains the difference in the balancing policies of the states? Idiosyncrasies such as *Demographic structure, Economic status, Leaders' perceived role, Level of threat perception*, among others that are peculiar to the states, will help us decipher why the states that perceive similar threats responded differently. These variables are usually hypothetical and will not mean that a state's particular character is the key reason it opts for a strategy over others. However, they give us insight as to why a state acted in such a way. For example, what explains Bahrain's bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia should be found in its limited resources, which made it tied to Saudi Arabia, its society's demographic character, which makes it more vulnerable to interference by Iran. It has

⁹⁴ Silvia Colombo, "Unpacking the GCC's Response to the Arab Spring," *Sharaka*, vol. 1, no. July (2012), pp. 1–4.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

limited resources to coerce and co-opt its majority Shia population. The al-Khalifa regime enjoys support from MB-linked organizations, especially since the Arab Uprisings; however, it joined Saudi Arabia and the UAE to fight the MB groups in the region. The UAE has pursued both directly balancing its threat perceptions and, at the same time, bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia. Its better economic status than Bahrain explains why it built a deterrent military to compete with Saudi Arabia in regional issues. Moreover, the UAE sometimes unilaterally concedes to Iran because of its historical ties to Iran, and economic interests in the region and beyond.

<i>Table 1: The Relationship Between Threat Perceptions, Unique Character of States and Responses</i>			
Structural Similarities.			
	Threat Perceptions.	Unit level Idiosyncrasies	Responses.
• Authoritarian & monarchical • Sunnis as ruling elite; • The interest of maintaining the status quo and regime survival • No offensive ambition • Common strategic exposure	• Internal • External	• <i>Demographic structure</i> • <i>Economic status</i> • <i>Leaders' perceived role</i> • <i>Level of threat perception</i>	• Internal Response: Military build-up through defence procurement and local manufacturing, crackdown on dissent, economic reforms etc. • External Responses: direct and indirect strategies for dealing with threat perceptions such as alliances, use of proxies, economic means etc.

CHAPTER TWO

CHANGING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE OF THE REGION

I. THE SECURITY DYNAMIC OF THE GULF BEFORE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A. IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The Gulf region's security depended on the interaction of several factors, each of which influenced situations in the region. The Gulf has traditionally been an area of confrontation between the three leading regional powers (Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia). This rivalry has been driven by a traditional agenda of territorial disputes, ideological competition (such as Saudi-Iran competition for leadership of the Islamic world and Saudi Arabia-Yemen, which has been complicated by pan Arabism and royalist versus radicals), rivalries for power and status, ethnic and sectarian divisions, as well as disputes over derived resources of oil.⁹⁶ In the Arab Gulf states where Islamists have been in opposition to the order, a revolutionary Iran with a link to the groups that are mainly Shiites complicates the matter. According to Gregory Gause, the rivalry between regional powers in the Gulf should be understood by analysing *"the links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions."*⁹⁷

After the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran's proclamation in 1979, neighbouring Arab countries became the object of the Iranian course aimed at exporting its Islamic revolution. The situation was further aggravated during the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted for eight-year (1980-1988) when some member countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, provided great financial and political support to Iraq. Nevertheless, the Arab Gulf states sought to end the war, which was a source of regional instability, by taking mediation steps to achieve this goal. One important thing to note is that due to the threats emanating from Iraq and Iran, the GCC was formed to balance the threatening powers.⁹⁸ In 1981, the GCC was created, combining Saudi Arabia, Bahrain,

⁹⁶ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p. 191.

⁹⁷ F. Gregory III Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," 2014. p. 1.

⁹⁸ Ferhat Pirinççi, *Orta Doğu'daki Silahlanma Girişimlerinin Küresel ve Bölgesel Güvenliğe Etkisi: Soğuk Savaş Dönemi*, Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2010.

Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman to ensure national and regional security; the countries of the region have intensified economic and military cooperation. Nevertheless, these countries held different views regarding the degree of integration and the need for Western powers' participation in ensuring regional security.

B. IRAQ'S INVASION OF KUWAIT

The Gulf War defined security dynamics in the Gulf in the rest of the 1990s and early 2000s. Saddam Hussein's government came under tremendous internal and external pressure, which threatened its unity. Iraq's defeat in 1991 changed some of the basic structures of the Gulf. Insurrections followed the war in the Kurdish majority region in the north and primarily Shiite Arabs in the south. Simultaneously, the almost autonomous Kurdistan region also received external military support from both Iran and the United States and have been used by rival states to influence its policies. Iran supports the Kurdish population in Iraq and vice versa, while Syria supports the Kurds in Turkey. Moreover, the United States policy in the region has shifted to Iran and Iraq's dual containment. The United States and Israel have incorporated into their policies hostility to both countries.⁹⁹

Iran's condemnation of the aggression committed by Iraq in 1990 against Kuwait helped normalise the region's situation and resolve several contradictions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and members of the GCC. The GCC member countries established good neighbourly relations with Iran after a common confrontation with Iraq brought their positions together. Iraq came out of the war weakened militarily, which reinforced Iran's position in the region. During the war, the neutrality of Iran allowed the country to be one of the main beneficiaries of the conflict. In addition to increasing its relative military capacity in the region, this also improved its relationship with its main regional rival, Iraq. Diplomatic relations between Baghdad and Tehran have improved due to joint positions contrary to the intrusive role of the United States in the Gulf and its dual containment policy and the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993. As Iran and Iraq relations normalize, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia got tougher over the revival of its island dispute with the UAE in 1992. While the GCC has become even more dependent on military aid from the United

⁹⁹ Buzan, Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. p. 203.

States, Iran sought to establish itself against any Western security arrangement in the Gulf. By the ending of the 20th century, Iran moderated its relations with the Gulf countries by abandoning its rhetoric of exporting revolution to its neighbours and withdrawing its support for Shiites in Bahrain. Nevertheless, while the US weakening of Iraq is to Iran's advantage, it remained opposed to the US and its policies in the region.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the Gulf War conditioned the GCC states to the status of practical protectorates of the West, particularly the United States as continued threats from Iran and Iraq have allowed alignment with the West. After the war, these states reached a security agreement with the US. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait placed large arms orders from the United States, France, and Great Britain. Thus, Saudi Arabia has become an apparent ally in the policy of dual containment of the United States against Iran and Iraq. However, the GCC States' alignment with the United States had its price, which is the loss of sovereignty to protectorates' status. The highlighted events above led to the radicalization of the Al-Qaeda network in response to American military presence in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.¹⁰¹

C. THE US INVASION OF IRAQ

A new situation arose after the military operation of coalition forces under the United States' leadership in Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 once again generated strong disputes over control of the regional order. The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 destabilised the balance of power existing in the region. For decades, Iraq had been acting as a buffer state among Iran and Saudi Arabia, somewhat hindering their conflicting relations. After the fall of Saddam, the region has seen this fragile balance destabilize and collapse.

After the invasion of Iraq, the regional landscape of the Gulf, that is, regional and transregional actors' role, underwent significant changes. Relations between Iran and Iraq have changed so that it is not possible to think of a regional balance of power between the two countries. As Kayhan Barzegar rightly argued,

“Since the overthrow of the Baathist regime in Iraq, it has been virtually impossible to establish a new kind of balance of power between Iraq and Iran.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* pp. 201-5.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

Developments in Iraq's structure of power and political system, including the institutionalization of the role and influence of Iraqi Shiites and Kurds, have ended in a redefinition of Iraq's internal politics and its relations with neighboring states, principally Iran."¹⁰²

While Saudi Arabia and Iran wanted regime change in Iraq, neither of the countries wanted the Iraqi invasion to happen, as Iraq served as a buffer. Iran's anti-American policy was at the heart of its more critical attitude on this issue. However, the positions of Iran and GCC members on the future development of Iraq coincided. Both sides supported the return of independence and sovereignty to Iraq and restored its active role as a participant in regional relations. The statesmen and official representatives of Iran and the GCC states emphasized their solidarity with the Iraqi people in deciding their destiny.

The failure of George W. Bush's foreign policy towards the Middle East resulted in the search for countries in the region to justify the causes of this failure.¹⁰³ Thus, Iran was the country that best fit the blame game. Then, using the Arab countries' distrust of Iran, the United States accused Iran of being the root of the Middle East's problems, including the conflict between Israel and Palestine, pointing to Iran as an evil that the Arab world must confront and contain.

The US military presence in the Gulf under the Bush administration was centred on containing Iran and any attempt to increase its influence. To this end, it entered alliances with Arab countries around Iran, establishing military bases in the Gulf. Counterbalancing Iranian influence is important for the United States to facilitate the defeat of Hezbollah, which poses a threat to Israel; weaken support for Palestine and Hamas, and tries to convince Arabs to recognize the government of Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq.¹⁰⁴ In turn, Tehran's biggest concern is not focused on Iraq, but Washington's intentions regarding the Islamic Republic. Although Iran supported the United States in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the placing of the country by the Americans on the "axis of evil" caused Iran to adopt a more prominent position as a regional actor.

¹⁰² Kayhan Barzegar, "Balance of Power in the Gulf: An Iranian View," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2010), p. 77, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00452.x.

¹⁰³ Amir M Haji-Yousefi, "Whose Agenda Is Served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent?," *Alternatives : Turkish Journal Of International Relations*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2009), p. 128.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* p. 130.

The US invasion of Iraq came with diluting the United States standing as a dependable guarantor of security of the Arab Gulf state. The impression was that the war in Iraq opened the way for Iran to wield more influence in the region.¹⁰⁵

Also, transnational actors, such as terrorist groups, made the regional scenario even more complex. With Saddam Hussein's removal, the disputes between the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites that the government contained came to the fore. This culminated in a civil war that has persisted for a long. As a result, a scenario of extreme instability took over the country, culminating in the participation of transnational groups formed by Islamic fundamentalists, such as Al Qaeda and its likes controlling significant parts of Iraqi territory and posing a threat to the rest of the states in the region. Moreover, the removal of Iraq from the regional balance of power led Iran and Saudi Arabia to seize the situation to increase their regional influence. Fredric Wehrey et al. point to these consequences in the region as follows:

*“The fall of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the war in Iraq have affected sweeping changes to the strategic landscape of the Middle East, radically shifting the regional balance of power. Old security paradigms have been thrown into question, and local states appear to be reaffirming, renegotiating, or rethinking their relations with one another and with outside powers. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have arguably been a central pivot around which this transformation has turned ... The dynamic relations between the two powers are unfolding in the Gulf, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, with important implications for regional stability and U.S. interests.”*¹⁰⁶

Given the weakening trend of the basic triangular structure (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq) in the Gulf following the United States' Iraq invasion, the dispute between the regional powers polarized between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the deterioration of the relative capacities of Iraq as a regional power. It led to the rise of sectarianism and terrorist groups after the withdrawal of American troops.

¹⁰⁵ Victor Gervais, “The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States’ Alliance Choices and Policies,” *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ Fredric Wehrey et al., “Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy,” 2009, pp. 1-2., www.rand.org.

New opportunities were presented in the early 2000s for Iran. The United States-led invasions of Iran, Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) opened a new political agenda in two of Iran's neighbours, the latter being a Shiite majority. Two regimes that are antagonistic to Iran were removed from power by the US. The Iraq invasion and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power created new conditions for better relations in Baghdad and Tehran's political and economic sectors. Iran now has reasonably close relations with the Iraqi Shiite government, providing economic and commercial incentives. As Gause succinctly noted,

*"The capacity of the Iraqi state had eroded severely after the Gulf War, but the American invasion was the coup de grace. Washington chose to tear down the authoritarian state's three major pillars—banning the ruling Ba'ath party, dissolving the military, and purging the bureaucracy of experienced cadres who were members of the party—in a misbegotten effort to build the state anew. What followed was an opening of the Iraqi political system to outside political influence, most notably from Iran."*¹⁰⁷

The weakening of Iraq's capabilities in relation to Saudi Arabia and Iran after 1991 indicates a redistribution of power in the structure of basic triangular rivalry, which was consolidated after the elimination of Saddam Hussein from power. It should be remembered that regional power status presupposes influence and capabilities, implying the possession of political and military capabilities, with economic support for such capabilities. Beyond material factors, the behaviour is necessary for a state to position itself as a regional power.¹⁰⁸ Iraq lost almost all its conventional weapons during the invasion led by the USA in 2003. Given the growing alignment between the Iraqi and Iranian governments, rearming Iraq poses risks for Washington as they may be sharing military technology, training, and intelligence. In a nutshell, arms transferred to Iraq would allow Iran easier access to the technology of the American military.¹⁰⁹

For the Gulf countries, the question of maintaining the unity of Iraq is of fundamental importance. They realize that the danger of its disintegration will entail an aggravation of the situation in the Gulf region. The essence of the problem is simple - the

¹⁰⁷ Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War." p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Buzan, Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

creation of new independent states on the territory of Iraq will mean a change in the regional balance of power and an opportunity for separatist forces in other countries to follow this example. The position of the governments of these countries was greatly influenced by the nature of the previous regime and its regional policy, which resulted in an eight-year war with Iran, the occupation of neighbouring Kuwait and threats to Saudi Arabia and other neighbouring countries.

D. IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

In the 2000s, relations between Iran and the Arab Gulf states became even more aggravated due to the Iranian nuclear program's actualisation. The Arab countries, primarily the Arab Gulf states neighbouring Iran, were very apprehensive at Iran's intentions to develop its nuclear program. For many years, since the world community criticized Iran because of its nuclear program, GCC members have advocated turning the Middle East region into a nuclear-weapon-free zone.¹¹⁰ This issue worried the neighbouring countries of Iran from the point of view that Iran would create nuclear weapons and have an undeniable military advantage over other states in the region. For GCC member states, this problem is also highlighted from the point of view of the safety of creating nuclear power plants near the borders of their states. It is also interpreted as Iran's desire for regional hegemony.

The GCC countries are extremely concerned about Iran's development of its nuclear program. Iran denies that it intends to create nuclear weapons. At the same time, it is actively developing its ballistic missile technology. The states of the GCC did not directly criticize Iran for its efforts to create nuclear weapons. However, over the years, the states openly condemned Tehran for seeking to obtain nuclear weapons. The problem of ensuring regional security also causes contradictions between Iran and the countries of the GCC. The collective security system of the GCC is mainly dependent on security relations with leading Western countries.¹¹¹ Therefore, it can be assumed that Iraq, which would have been involved in solving regional security problems due to the development of the political process in this country, is unlikely to oppose the approach to this problem

¹¹⁰ Ibrahim A. Karawan, "The Case For a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East," *Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1998, pp. 184–93, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-26972-3_10.

¹¹¹ Abdullah K Al Shayji, "The GCC-U.S. Relationship: A GCC Perspective," 2014, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/mepo.12082>.

that the GCC proposes. At the same time, Iran, which opposes foreign troops' presence in the region and the participation of foreign powers, primarily the United States, in ensuring regional security, disagrees with this decision. Iran categorically opposes any involvement of external forces in this process. The GCC states support the idea that the leading world powers should be responsible for the region's security, which is paramount for the state.

The above factors coalesced to influence inter Arab and contradictions existing between the GCC states and Iran. In other words, the disputes shape the threat perceptions of the states. It is emphasized that almost all the Gulf states dispute the existing borders' correctness and put forward territorial claims to each other. The seizure by Iraq of Kuwait testifies to the depth and explosiveness of these claims.

Although the state is the main analytical framework in the Gulf, at the domestic level, sub-states and armed groups and playing a significant role in the production of internal vulnerabilities also reverberate in security dynamics in the region. To put it differently, the Gulf countries' internal life in which national, confessional, social and other contradictions exist constitutes a potential threat to the states.

II. EMERGING THREATS WITH THE ARAB UPRISINGS

“As early as the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, three distinct Middle Eastern geopolitical axes became clear: an openly counter-revolutionary axis led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE; an Islamo-reformist (pro-revolutionary and in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots) axis led by Turkey and Qatar; and an “axis of resistance” (resisting the US and Israel), embodied by Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.”¹¹²

“There are two predictable and nearly always mistaken responses to any great international upheaval: one is to say that everything has changed; the other is to say that nothing has changed.”¹¹³

¹¹² Adlene Mohammedi, “The Dismal Record of the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi Axis in the Arab World,” *Middle East Eye*, 06/23/2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/saudi-arabia--mohamed-bin-salman-abu-dhabi-dismal-record-axis-arab-world>.

¹¹³ Fred Halliday, “A New Global Configuration,” *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, ed. by Ken Booth, Tim Dunne, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 235.

A. THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND REGIME SURVIVAL

The Arab Uprisings brought about revolutionary fervours and civil wars, which severely impacted the Arab Gulf monarchies. The effect of the Arab Spring includes the fall of regimes and replacing them by regimes ideologically not similar to the Arab monarchs in the Gulf as perceived by them. By the end of 2010, the Middle East has faced turmoil resulting from widespread protests that led to regimes' end. Since then, the Arab Gulf states threat perceptions and foreign and security policies revolved around stability and regime survival. While the stability and regime survival parameters within the status quo oriented Arab Gulf monarchs have been existing since the creation of the states, the uprisings brought to fore the relevance of the regimes' security as opposed to that of the states. This is so because the Arab Spring amplified the existing internal threat perceptions, which is also linked to the regimes' external threat perceptions.

A change from the external threat to the internal security threat has taken place since the Arab Uprisings. This culminated in a stronger focus on internal threats linked to the regimes' regional environment. The regimes' overriding interests were to retain the status quo and preserve the current bond between the governing and the general public. Nevertheless, there was also increasing awareness that change should be an integral part of preserving the status quo. This was attributed to the continuing change taking place at the larger social stage, where the younger generation no longer felt tied by prior contracts and customs that prevailed in political systems, with the effect that this generation continued to press for the rewrite of the current compact.

B. THE RISE OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND POLITICAL ISLAM

The MB's popular rise to power in Tunisia and Egypt gave the bulk of the Gulf monarchies a disturbing warning. In the same vein, established democracy in Cairo challenged the stability of the regimes given that, it would inspire change, if not revolt in regimes that are not adaptable to change. The MB's expanded influence contribute to Islam's politicisation, with volatile repercussions for the Gulf region, particularly Saudi Arabia.

The MB is influential for many decades and has a long tradition of support in the Gulf and beyond. The political activity of the MB set together an imperative of change

through a democratic process. Indeed, since the Arab Uprisings, the MB and other political Islamists became more active and deemed a serious challenge to the regimes.¹¹⁴ The MB philosophy is at odd with the Gulf monarchies and would likely weaken monarchical patriarchal structures. The Wasatiyya Islam by the MB, which is a moderate stance towards Islamic politics with an emphasis on the need to enforce shariah objectively, threatens the supposed religious authority of the states, Saudi Arabia in particular over the Sunni Muslim world. Furthermore, a culturally oriented pluralistic republic's democratic approach questioned the idea of the hereditary monarchy institution.¹¹⁵

With the Arab Uprisings and by challenging the religious narrative presented by regimes, Islamists can weaken the legitimacy of monarchical government. Furthermore, the MB and political Islamists offer an alternative system of governance based on legitimization strategy, which threatens the continuity of monarchical regimes. This is added to the Islamists' alleged loyalty to a foreign organization (the Muslim Brotherhood) and gives a complete picture of the regimes concern for this group. In short, Islamists not only question legitimacy based on the regimes religious values, but they would also have the potential to offer a legitimate alternative to non-monarchical government. In particular, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi perceived the MB in Egypt as a transnational threat due to the apprehension that the Egyptian MB could influence Islamist in their countries.

Despite the above trends, it should be remembered that there has been a change since 2013 in the regional power configuration. What explains the change was the coup against Mursi in Cairo, which eventually led to the persecution of the MB and Tehran's increasing influence in the middle east. These changes have facilitated "overlapping of the axis formation," which is a consequence of changing threat perception. As the power of numerous MB divisions declined, Riyadh, in particular, began reassessing the future utility of political Islam actors against Tehran and its allies. More pragmatism is being accomplished by Abu Dhabi, as al-Islah demonstrates its ties with the political Islamist. But amid these discrepancies in foreign policies and evolving bilateral ties in general,

¹¹⁴ Alexey Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry," *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015), pp. 19–20.

¹¹⁵ Julius Dihstelhoff, Alexander Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring,'" p. 37. *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*, ed. by Philipp O Amour, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

Abu Dhabi's war toward political Islam has continued to be waged. At the same time, Ankara and Doha appear to endorse political Islam.¹¹⁶

C. THE RISE OF IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

Tehran is considered an existential threat to the Arab Gulf Monarchs since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Prior to the Arab Uprisings, America's misadventure in Iraq that led to the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the Arab Uprisings which eliminated Egypt and Syria from being geostrategic players in regional affairs handed Iran an opportunity to exert direct influence in Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and especially the widening hostility between Tehran and Riyadh, the Sunni-Shia split increased. In reaction to the 2011 uprising, Riyadh's incitement of sectarianism may be viewed as a pre-emptive counterrevolutionary tactic.¹¹⁷

After the invasion of Iraq, Tehran exploited the opportunity handed to it by US policies that led to the ouster of Saddam to become more assertive in the Levant. Centred on increasing influence in Iraq, the strengthening of relations with Assad's regime and Hezbollah provided Tehran with ground links to the Levant that prompted King Abdullah of Jordan to speak of an imminent Shiite Crescent.¹¹⁸ Anti-Zionism, therefore, is no longer the distinguishing traits of the politics of the Arab state. A new friendship between Israel and the Arab Gulf states of the GCC was forged due to mutual animosity against Tehran and its allies.¹¹⁹ Although Arab leaders have marginalized the Palestinian situation, the non-Arab countries, Tehran and Ankara, entering the fray of Arab politics still keep the Palestinian problem important, as they portray themselves as the Palestinian champions. Nevertheless, as evinced by the public reactions in Arab states when Israel

¹¹⁶ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'"

¹¹⁷ Raffaella A Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, Eduard Soler Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, p. 23. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3367815.

¹¹⁸ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms," *"The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring"*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011." p. 23.

fought Hezbollah and Hamas in 2006 and 2008-2009, the Palestinian cause still resonates within the Arabs.¹²⁰

Moreover, through the support, it gives to other groups in Iraq, such as the PMF, and Houthi, in Yemen, Iran has wielded more influence in the region.¹²¹ The PMF was established to fight ISIS in Iraq.¹²² While ISIS is perceived as a threat to the regimes, the financing, advising and other support it received from Iran is of great concern. Indeed, Tehran sees the PMF as a way of advancing further its influence in Iraq and beyond. Therefore, it welcomed an act to legitimise the incorporation of the PMF to the Iraqi Security Force in 2016 because it sees the legislation as well deserved, and the effective performance of the militia group earned it legitimacy.¹²³

The exercise of power by Iranian proxies intensified the suspicion of an influence on its proxies.¹²⁴ As Henna Fürtig argued, Iran has played “a leading role in the creation of an ‘axis of resistance’, which includes Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Ramallah, and Gaza”.¹²⁵ With money and weaponry, Iran assisted the Syrian regime since Assad is its strategic partner. A strategic setback for Iran would have been the fall of Assad and the loss of links to Hezbollah, which will lead to loss of influence in the Levant.¹²⁶

D. DIFFICULTY IN PRIORITIZING AND DEALING WITH THREATS

With Tehran’s influence progressively increasing, the Arab Gulf monarchs have struggled to coordinate how internal challenges should be ranked and tackled. This lack of agreement contributed to a deficiency in their capacity to interpret enduring trends of friendship and hostility and a regional solution to the complexities of contemporary political dynamics. Although the fear of the awakening, coupled with Tehran’s increasing impact, tends to align the states (evidenced in its deployment in Bahrain and the Yemeni war), there is a strong deficiency of consensus on recognizing, evaluating and prioritizing

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ Hamdi Malik, “What Role Will Iran-Linked Militias Play Once IS Leaves Iraq?” *Al-Monitor*, 2017.

¹²⁴ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, “Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the ‘Arab Spring.’” p. 40.

¹²⁵ Fürtig, “Iran: Winner or Loser of the ‘Arab Spring’?,” p. 28.

¹²⁶ Bahi, “Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement,” pp. 89–101.

other potential internal challenges such as that of forces resorting to political Islam.¹²⁷ Doha's unwavering support for Islamist is not in line with the majority of the Arab Gulf monarchs. For example, Cairo's MB-led government obtained substantial aid from Doha, providing the state with \$8 billion in monetary assistance. Doha and Cairo have also signed a gas agreement to relieve electricity shortages and proposed to spend \$18 billion over 5 years. Doha supported Islamists groups which led to the downfall of the Gaddafi regime and resistance movements in Syria.¹²⁸

Many analysts in the Gulf were stunned by the downfall of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, a loyal ally of Riyadh. At the same time, Tehran viewed the uprisings as an "Islamic Awakening", exemplifying a late effort to reproduce the 1979 revolution in Iran.¹²⁹ Iran sought to manipulate the uprisings by supporting Shia protests in Bahrain and supplying arms for the Yemeni Houthi movement.¹³⁰ Indisputably, Ayatollah Khamenei anticipated the so-called Islamic awakening to expand throughout the region. President Ahmadinejad reiterated the Iranian supreme leaders' expectation by stressing that the "*uprisings...were inspired by Iran's defiance against western powers*", suggesting how Tehran became the change agent for the Arab world.¹³¹ When the Arab Gulf established order could not rely on the help of existing partners, the uprisings began to surface. The Arab Gulf States might anticipate the assistance of other status quo regional forces, but mostly in the United States against the revisionists, in the period before the uprisings. However, no assistance has been accessible since the beginning of the uprisings in 2010-2011.¹³²

¹²⁷ Victor Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies," *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 32.

¹²⁸ *ibid.* p. 40.

¹²⁹ Amr Yossef, "Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East," no. May (2019), p. 77; Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms," p. 90.

¹³⁰ Amr Yossef, "Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East," no. May (2019) p. 77.

¹³¹ Afshin Molavi, "Invoking the Arab Spring, Iran Rewrites Its Own History," *The National*, 04/06/2011, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/invoking-the-arab-spring-iran-rewrites-its-own-history-1.436326>; Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms," p. 96.

¹³² Yossef, "Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East," p. 78

E. THE RISE OF TURKISH INFLUENCE IN THE GULF

Turkey has shown readiness to exert its influence in the Gulf region. Indeed, Ankara has transformed into a regional power and began projecting influence in the Middle East, essentially in the Gulf and North Africa.¹³³ Turkey is a supporter of political Islam, as seen in its close ties with the MB led government in Egypt and its close relations with Qatar. Ankara's advocacy for political Islam is perceived as an external threat to the stability of the Gulf monarchies. In contrast, the Qatari strategy of supporting MB is perceived as an internal threat by the states. Of note is the escalation of a split between the Ankara and the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis after the military takeover in Cairo. One popular example is a Riyadh-Abu Dhabi initiative to block Ankara from joining the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member in 2014.¹³⁴

The Arab awakening contributed to enhancing the MB as a transnational player that Doha and Ankara embraced. Turkey and Qatar's position should be seen as attempts to help common interests and encourage democratic reform. Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former minister of foreign affairs of Turkey, sees the Ankara-Qatar strategic partnership that is buttressing a new regional order as an "Axis of Democracy."¹³⁵ Therefore, the behaviours of Doha can be seen as a strategic willingness to back the winners to improve its impact and align with Ankara to mitigate its smallness in a region with overflowing upheaval. Doha interpreted the rise of Islamism as a strategic chance to win more allies in the area to become autonomous of its strong neighbours. Ankara also saw an opening in political trends to ally itself with Cairo, Tunis and other figures that promote revolution. It is noteworthy to state that prior to this, Qatar and Turkey enjoyed good relationship in fields such as security, commerce etc. Qatar sees Turkey as a country it can look up to when balancing Tehran.¹³⁶

¹³³ Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011."

¹³⁴ Julius Dinstelhoff, Alexander Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring,'" *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*, ed. by Philipp O Amour, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

¹³⁵ Anthony Shadid, "Turkey Predicts Partnership with Egypt as Regional Anchors," *The New York Times*, (09/18/2011); Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011."

¹³⁶ Tayyar Arı, Veysel Ayhan, "Basra Körfezi Ülkeleri ve Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu'daki Rolüne Bakış," *Ortadoğu Analiz*, vol. 2, no. 23 (2010), pp. 7–17.

Following the military takeover from Mursi in July 2013, the ongoing split intensified, establishing a region-wide ideological tension between Doha and Ankara on the one side and Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Cairo other.¹³⁷ In Doha, as in Ankara, the MB posed no threat to the governments, or at least, they do not perceive the MB and political Islam as a threat to their survival. The MB branch that existed in Doha had formally disbanded in the 1990s and could not mobilize against the government in the new environment. The rise of the MB was not a challenge to Ankara because Turkey is a democracy with its adherence to Islam. Under the Justice and Development Party, it has demonstrated a prototype for governance in the region. Ankara has also played a major role in the Gulf crisis, essentially sending more troops to Doha since 2017.¹³⁸ Simultaneously, Doha and Abu Dhabi became true regional forces, utilizing hard and soft power to demonstrate influential political presence beyond the Gulf.¹³⁹

In November 2017, Qatar, Turkey and Iran all concluded trade-enhancing deals. This contributed to more distrust in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, culminating in Mohammed bin Salman's public remarks identifying Ankara as one of the "triangle of evil," along with Tehran and political Islamists.¹⁴⁰ The coordination of policies of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the one hand and the bolstering of collaboration between Doha and Ankara in the military field on the other hand have reinforced the discord already existing in the Gulf. Likewise, the Riyadh-led Arab Quartet and the counter-terrorism alliance are based on the idea of respectively ostracizing Doha and Tehran and their regional allies.¹⁴¹

F. CRACKS WITHIN THE GCC ALLIANCE

Within the Arab Gulf monarchs' alliance, the existing cracks have widened. The Arab Gulf monarchs, as argued by Amr Yossef, has a "belligerent status quo Gulf trio [Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain], the revisionist Qatar, and the almost neutral Kuwait

¹³⁷ Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011."

¹³⁸ Muddassir Quamar, "The Turkish Military Base in Doha: A Step towards Gaining 'Strategic Depth' in the Middle East?" *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, 09/26/2017.

¹³⁹ Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011."

¹⁴⁰ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'" p. 51.

¹⁴¹ Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011."

and Oman.”¹⁴² The rifts within the Gulf monarchs have escalated as they have become more economically, financially and militarily active in volatile areas and struggle for dominance in the power vacuum resulting from the displacement of regional order.¹⁴³

The rise of the MB and Ennahda in Egypt and Tunisia respectively led the GCC to invite non-Gulf states such as Morocco and Jordan to join the alliance. While they are geographically not located in the same subregion, they share similarities as Arabs, Sunni monarchies with ties to Western powers. With the turmoil ending regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the monarchies coalesced together to safeguard their regime security.¹⁴⁴

The perception of internal threat (with its transnational blend) to legitimacy, security, and stability of the Gulf states led them to work closely together. They worked more closely in balancing their internal threat linked to their regime security than they did in responding to regional crises such as the Syrian crisis, the rise of al-Qaeda, and ISIS. As Marc Lynch noted, undermining important states and inviting numerous other non-state players opened the path to proxy wars and competitive interference in the region. The Arab Gulf monarchies, as well as non-Arab regional states and influential non-state players, like the MB, reacted.¹⁴⁵ The Arab Uprisings has indeed triggered the perception of threat to the survival of the regimes due to the demands of the public which was conducted via street protest and the eventual rise of the MB and Tehran’s role in utilising its proxies across the region.¹⁴⁶

The Arab Spring has widened the fissure already existing within the status quo alliance as Qatar, for example, supports the uprisings outside the Gulf, which is revisionist in itself. Competition within the GCC is not new; since the Arab Uprisings, competition for influence has been of a magnitude that was not seen before. Since then, both states

¹⁴² Amr Yossef, “Gulfization of the Middle East Security Complex: The Arab Spring’s Systemic Change,” *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*, ed. by Philipp O Amour, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020. P. 79.

¹⁴³ Gervais, “The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States’ Alliance Choices and Policies,” p. 32.

¹⁴⁴ Curtis R. Ryan, “Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East,” *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, 2015; Sara Hamdan, “Gulf Council Reaches Out to Morocco and Jordan,” *The New York Times*, (05/25/2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/middleeast/26iht-M26-GCC.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

¹⁴⁶ Curtis R. Ryan, “Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East,” *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, 2015.

and non-state actors competed to the extent of causing both internal and external threat to the states, at least as perceived by the regimes. Qatar's supporting the MB and not acting tough on Tehran led to a diplomatic spat in 2014 and 2017.

Doha also contributed to the political rupture between 2014 and 2017 by working with the MB and not stern action on Iran. During the spat, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and obstructed it in naval, air and nation boundaries. The boycott against another one by three of its six participants, Qatar, in 2017 has marked a huge blow to GCC's reputation and viability. Although the GCC has historically encountered predicaments, the severity of this crisis has not been seen before. The malevolence challenged the underlying values behind establishing the alliance, contributing to a debate about the risks of its fragmentation.¹⁴⁷

G. FLUIDITY OF ALLIANCES WITHIN THE GULF

One defining feature of the post Arab Spring environment is fluidity within alliances. Even within the same states that align themselves to a common cause, there seems to be a difference in their approaches to their perceived threats. States identifying themselves as partners do not attach equivalent value to disputes in the region. While the aligned states determine who or what the danger is, they do not always pursue identical policies. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's distinct posture, in crisis within the Gulf and beyond, is well demonstrated in this sense.¹⁴⁸ The small footprint of the UAE in Syria and surreptitious communication with the Assad, although other Gulf monarchs fought enthusiastically for its collapse, is also evident. Contradictions are identified concerning Yemen's war, where Abu Dhabi favoured the battle against al-Qaeda rather than the campaign against the Houthis. In Libya, Saudi Arabia appears to have a separate stance where it projects influence by working with the Madkhali-Salafi groups, while the UAE works with warlord Khalifa Haftar.¹⁴⁹

While disagreements between the alliance of the Arab Gulf monarchies are not uncommon, in recent years, several issues have sparked tensions, ranging from unresolved border skirmishes and border claims to spying allegations (albeit strains and

¹⁴⁷ Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011."

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

discords usually arise behind discreet doors). However, what separates the latest events is that some members are defying and not observing the agreements on what constitutes a threat to the regimes in the domestic arena. Consequently, weakening the alliance's main accomplishment over the ensuing years, i.e., the monarchies' willingness to maintain a high level of the alliance when it comes to security within the states' borders. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's stance on Yemen and the conditions levied on Doha if the blockade must be lifted should be read as the status quo alliance of the Arab monarchs in the Gulf are subject to make decisions that challenge the alignment.¹⁵⁰

H. DECLINING ROLE OF THE US IN THE REGION

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US faced domestic exhaustion linked to the war that contributed to its withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Along with Iraq's domestic politics, this US premature withdrawal contributed to the rise of ISIS and increasing Iran's influence. The settlement that restricted the Shia and militants and made sure the Sunnis remained in the political arena was overturned when the US withdrew its troops from Iraq. Nouri Al-Maliki continued to rid the state of former Baathists, predominantly Sunnis yet secularist under Saddam Hussein. Maliki's "de-baathification" policies further radicalised and militarized the Sunnis.¹⁵¹

Washington's political choices during the Arab Spring made its allies within the Gulf club of monarchies lose confidence in its commitment to guaranteeing regional stability and protecting their interests.¹⁵² Neither Washington nor their European friends were willing to participate in defending them as the protests continue. During the Arab Spring, the US decided to lead from behind, i.e., not interfering in the will of the Arabs, led to the collapse of regimes that have been long-time allies of the US and the Arab Gulf monarchs. The US has shifted its priority from the Middle East to Asia, where its strategic interests are arguably fundamental. US actions led the Arab Gulf club to rethink their security policies, solely relying on the US umbrella for protection.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Dania Koleilat Khatib, "Arab Gulf States' Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings," *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities*, ed. by Dania Koleilat Khatib, Marwa Maziad, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p. 29.

¹⁵² Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies," p. 32.

Washington's policy for the Middle East during Obama focused on "retrenchment" and a nuclear settlement with Tehran. In pursuit of an expedited move to Asia, Washington started to retrench from the region. Marc Lynch noted that Washington has "rightsized" its position in the region by minimising its vast military and political participation.¹⁵³ This balancing act was intended to guarantee the US's internal stability and protect its strategic ambitions without pulling Washington into regional strife.¹⁵⁴

The Gulf monarchs, particularly Riyadh considers US responses such as unwillingness to challenge its rivals, reluctance to intervene in Syria against the Assad regime and rewarding Tehran with a nuclear agreement in 2015 as deserting its traditional allies.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, there was disappointment in Obama's initiatives in Syria. After chemical attacks on the opponents, Riyadh found that Washington's choice of calling off its threatened military operations on Assad was harmful. In the uprising that swept the government in Yemen and opened the path for Iran-supported rebel Houthi to influence, the US appeared peripheral actors. Many in the area saw Obama's stance to mask his indecisiveness and plan to lessen Washington's involvement in the region.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the US non-interference combined with negotiating a nuclear agreement with Tehran without involving major Gulf monarchs has strongly alerted the monarchies in the Gulf.¹⁵⁷

After the Pentagon announced the Strategic Guidance in 2012, indicating a recalibration of its security strategy in Asia's direction, expectations have stepped up about the fallback of Washington in the Gulf. Consequentially, the "rebalancing" strategy suggested the military shield provided by Washington is leaking. In tandem, the Gulf monarchs became very active and decisive actors in the states hit by protests whereby they pursued different policies. These differences later flared up into clashes within the

¹⁵³ Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, (10/21/2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east>.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*; Riham Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement," *International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2017), p. 95, doi:10.1080/03932729.2017.1306395.

¹⁵⁵ Yossef, "Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East."

¹⁵⁶ Fawaz A Gerges, "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?" *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 2 (2013), pp. 299–323; Cinzia Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics," *International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2020), pp. 94–5, doi:10.1080/03932729.2020.1742505.

¹⁵⁷ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudis Expand Regional Power as Others Falter," *The New York Times*, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/26/world/middleeast/saudis-expand-regional-power-as-others-falter.html>; Khatib, "Arab Gulf States' Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings," p. 29.

Gulf monarchical club in 2014 and 2017.¹⁵⁸ Consequently, most governments in the area seem to be concluding that they must depend on their capabilities to defend their strategic interests and, ultimately, their regimes. It has placed Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the front lines of hawkish and unwavering foreign policy. The consequence has been interventionist and assertive foreign policy, which came amid Russia's re-entrance to the politics of the Middle East, seen in its direct engagement in Syria.

I. THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

In 2013 Washington reached an interim nuclear agreement with Iran (which materialized into the substantive agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by p5+1 in 2015)¹⁵⁹, gave Tehran the chance to reintegrate into the world financial system from its previous pariah state status. Under Obama, Washington prioritized negotiating with Tehran to curtail its aggressive policies in the region and reinstate a more pragmatic Tehran into the world. The nuclear deal also called for coordination between Washington and Tehran against ISIS.¹⁶⁰ The consequence is that the Arab monarchs in the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, felt abandoned by Washington.

Washington's policy towards Tehran intensified the fears of the Arab Gulf monarchies. The secretly handled nuclear deal in Muscat created concerns that Washington would placate Tehran at the expense of the Gulf monarchs,¹⁶¹ leading to a problem for the security of the states. Indeed, the agreement made Washington's balancing more complex and increased friction between Washington and its allies in the region. Besides, due to the US's decreased role in the region, powers such as Moscow and Beijing compete to fill the void.¹⁶²

As soon as energy independence was achieved, the US appeared willing to strike a new balance of dividing the region's responsibility between Tehran and Riyadh to

¹⁵⁸ Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics," pp. 94–5.

¹⁵⁹ For details of the deal, see Tayyar Ari, "Rethinking the Iran Nuclear Deal and Possible Implications on Regional and Global Politics," no. November (2015), pp. 1–9

¹⁶⁰ Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement," p. 96.

¹⁶¹ Abdullah K Al Shayji, "The GCC-U.S. Relationship: A GCC Perspective," *Middle East Policy*, vol. XXI, no. 3 (2014); Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics," p. 95.

¹⁶² Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement," p. 96.

maintain its stability, similar to the “twin pillar” policy had done in the past.¹⁶³ Due to Tehran’s expanding influence, Riyadh’s regime fears a grim future with Shiites’ demonstration, which may evolve to civil war with militias supported by Tehran, and Washington’s refusal to aid its allies.¹⁶⁴ This turmoil provided a favourable atmosphere for the emergence of new players. Via its proxies, Tehran, whose presence was restricted to Iraq was able to extend its reach.

J. THE RISE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

The vacuum created by the Arab Spring in Syria and the weakness of states in the region such as Iraq and non-state armed actors linked to religions emerged to challenge states’ authority in the region. This development only increases the scale of geopolitical conflicts, contributing to rising of ISIS, which came to occupy large territorial areas, controlling the production and sale of oil and the local population. The ISIS threat extends beyond the purely military nature to include a threat to the state’s identity. ISIS playing with the tendency of division and spreading sectarian strife in the region threatens to split nations, harm social cohesion, and then threaten the identity of the states in the Gulf.

Amid the rise of ISIS, paramilitaries and extremists, who sometimes receive funding from other states, are formed. Groups such as the PMF in Iraq and Houthis in Yemen wield more influence with support from Tehran,¹⁶⁵ which has undoubtedly posed a threat to the Arab Gulf states, given that Iran has gained more leverage over them.

¹⁶³ Bianco, “The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics,” p. 95.

¹⁶⁴ Yossef, “Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East Changes of Military Doctrines in the Middle East.” p. 78.

¹⁶⁵ Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

CHAPTER THREE

THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF SAUDI ARABIA

I. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

1. Saudi Arabia and Iran

a. *Iranian Revolution*

Saudi Arabia perceives a threat from Iran as a result of the Islamic revolution in 1979. Prior to the revolution, the states, Saudi Arabia especially cooperated with Iran against a common threat (i.e., the Soviet Union) which was by all mean, due to their partnership with the US and its view of “regional affairs” from a lens of rivalry between the East and West.¹⁶⁶ In the 1960s, when Saudi Arabia was fighting Egypt in a proxy war in Yemen, Iran was on its side. Saudi Arabia and Iran both served as the US twin pillars to protect its interest in the region in the 1970s.¹⁶⁷ The countries also worked to deal with Iraq’s aggressive ambitions and assisted Oman against radical forces that cause internal instability. Thus, they have many common interests, including maintaining regional peace and security; preventing the expansion of Baath; maintaining close connections with the West; preventing Soviet penetration into the Middle East, and resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute.¹⁶⁸

To show how close the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran was, Iran mourned Saudis King Faisal’s assassination for seven days.¹⁶⁹ However, the cooperation between the two, which is sometimes marred by rivalry (Sha’s ambition to become the protector of the Gulf), ended due to the Islamic revolution. Since the onset, Iran possessed far greater capability, which can be measured in terms of the size of its military,

¹⁶⁶ Hassan Ahmadian, “Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Age of Trump,” *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2018), pp. 133–50, doi:10.1080/00396338.2018.1448579.

¹⁶⁷ Ferhat Pirinççi, “Power Struggle in the Gulf: A Re-Evaluation of the Iran-Iraq War,” *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2015), p.234, doi:10.17550/aid.60317

¹⁶⁸ René Rieger, “The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990,” 2013.

¹⁶⁹ Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* 2016.

population, geography and whatnot in relations to Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, apart from its hegemonic ambition in the region (which clashed with Saudis'), it had no clearly defined aggressive intention towards Saudi Arabia. It is argued by Emir Hadžikadunić that,

*“Iran and Saudi Arabia feared their rivals among Arab nationalists, socialists or communists far more than they feared each other. This fear was great enough that it not only drew Saudi Arabia, a Wahhabi Islamist state, and Iran, then a nationalist and pro-secular Shia state, together, but also made them more receptive to Islamic political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As Iran and Saudi Arabia accepted American dominance, they complemented each other and set aside issues that could have split them, including the sectarian divide.”*¹⁷⁰

However, the 1979 revolution changed the balance of power in the Gulf and the Middle East as it led to the collapse of the existing US twin pillars. Consequently, Iran turned to a country that was ‘friend’ to an enemy threatening Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf states.¹⁷¹ The Islamic revolution led to the emergence of “A revisionist and pro-Soviet Iraq, a pro-American Saudi Arabia, which preferred the status quo, and an Iran that remained tied to neither.”¹⁷² After the triumph of the Iranian Revolution, Riyadh understood that it would be the ideal candidate for the expansion of the revolution since it is a monarchical state and had significant contingents of marginalized and discriminated Shiite population. The revolution reminds Saudi Arabia of the shadow of the Iraqi monarchy’s rough end 20 years earlier. Since the Iranian revolution’s victory and the formation of a theocratic regime, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia oscillate between tension and temporary outbursts. Therefore, it could be said with certainty that the event of 1979 is a crucial factor influencing Saudi-Iranian relations up to the present. May Darwich avers, “The Iranian Revolution and the subsequent change in the regional

¹⁷⁰ Emir Hadžikadunić, “Iran–Saudi Ties: Can History Project Their Trajectory?” *Ifimes*, 2015, <https://www.ifimes.org/en/9726>.

¹⁷¹ Barry Rubin, “The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War,” *The Iran-Iraq War*, ed. by Efraim Karsh, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989, p. 122, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-20050-4_9; Ferhat Pirinççi, *Orta Doğu’daki Silahlanma Girişimlerinin Küresel ve Bölgesel Güvenliğe Etkisi: Soğuk Savaş Dönemi*, Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2010.

¹⁷² Hadžikadunić, “Iran–Saudi Ties: Can History Project Their Trajectory? .”

configuration did not directly affect the physical security of the Kingdom.”¹⁷³ Originally, Riyadh tried to maintain equilibrium towards Baghdad and Tehran by placating Iran without upsetting Iraq. If one was too risky, the kingdom was expected to play against them.¹⁷⁴

It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia welcomed the new regime in Iran because it has raised the banner of Islamic unity and offers an opportunity for settlement between the sects and overcoming differences. During the events preceding the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia’s position was that the happening in Iran was Iranian internal affairs that the Iranians could solve. Saudi Arabia recognised the revolution and saw an essential partnership in its Islamic character.¹⁷⁵ Prince Abdullah noted that,

*“The new regime in Iran has removed all obstacles and reservation in the way of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Islam is the organiser of our relations. Muslim interests are the goal of our activities and the holy Koran is the constitution of both countries ... For this reason, I am very optimistic about the future of relations between us and the Islamic republic of Iran. Our cooperation will have an Islamic dynamism against which no obstacles facing the Muslims can stand ... the material potentials – money and oil – possessed by the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, and by the Islamic and Arab worlds will be utilised and directed by an Islamic spirit – a spirit which is superior to all hollow secular pomp such as authority, dominance, or self-interests. The fact is that we are very relieved by the Islamic Republic of Iran’s policy for making Islam and not heavy armaments, the organiser of cooperation, a base for dialogue and the introduction to a prosperous and dignified future.”*¹⁷⁶

However, the hope of Saudi Arabia regarding the revolution soon dissipated before minds and hearts absorbed them. Khomeini’s belief and rhetoric of spreading the revolution is the primary driver as it poses a threat to the Arab countries of the Gulf.¹⁷⁷ The primary target of Iran’s policy then was its immediate neighbours. Iran did that by

¹⁷³ May Darwich, *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Al-Badi, “Saudi-Iranian Relations: A Troubled Trajectory,” p. 193.

¹⁷⁶ Darwich, *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region*.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.122.

way of propaganda and mass demonstrations in the Gulf countries, as well as brutal attacks and sabotage in the Arab states of the Gulf in 1980.¹⁷⁸ These actions constitute aggressive intentions towards Saudi Arabia and its friends in the Gulf, as Walt suggested.

For the Saudis, the Islamic revolution was a threat to national security as it posed both military and ideological threat to the kingdom. Iranian spiritual leaders led by Ayatollah Khomeini openly criticised the Saudi regime as un-Islamic and called on Muslims to carry out revolutions in other countries.¹⁷⁹ It was also alleged that Iran accepted and hosted some Saudi Shiite groups. Since Shiites constitute a significant minority in Saudi Arabia, they could be utilised by Iran to influence Sunni rulers.¹⁸⁰ Although Iran denied participation in such, all indicators pointed to the involvement of Iran.¹⁸¹

The Iranian revolution inspired two events that threatened Saudi's internal security. In November 1979, armed fanatics seized the grand mosque of Mecca. In a declaration on the Grand Mosque, the organization demanded that Western cultural values be removed and that relations with Western regimes exploiting the state cut off. It stated that the Al-Saud family were not qualified to lead as they endorsed the country's exploitation by foreigners. The Saudi regime had to be overthrown and replaced by a truly Islamic government, and that those that managed the regime should face the law for mismanaging the country. Until the US reversed its antagonism against Islam, Saudi Arabia had to halt its oil deliveries to Washington. Ultimately, the declaration called for the removal from the country of foreign experts.¹⁸² With the help of foreign forces, the National Guard of Saudi Arabia successfully suppressed the extremists. Due to the grand mosque seizure, the Saudis role as a pillar of American security in the Gulf was questioned.¹⁸³ Saudi Arabia turned to France for assistance to deal with the situation. France sent officers from its elite anti-terrorism unit to revitalise the Saudi forces and

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ F. Gregory Gause, "Revolution and Threat Perception: Iran and the Middle East," *International Politics*, vol. 52, no. 5 (2015), pp. 637–45, doi:10.1057/ip.2015.27.

¹⁸⁰ Rubin, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War," p. 123.

¹⁸¹ Al-Badi, "Saudi-Iranian Relations: A Troubled Trajectory," p. 196.

¹⁸² David Commins, "*The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*," London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2006, p. 164.

¹⁸³ Steve Yetiv, "The Middle East in World Politics: The Rise of Saudi Arabia," 1990.

train Saudis to use gas canisters and antiterrorist grenades. It developed a plan to force the militants out of the basement of the grand mosque.¹⁸⁴

Following the grand mosque event, with the inspiration coming from Tehran's media broadcast, the Shia dominated oil-rich eastern region of Saudi Arabia started protesting in 1980. Official discrimination turned Shiites into second-class residents in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it will be rational to think that the Iranian revolution would inspire the oppressed Shiites in Saudi Arabia to press for their rights. In the Eastern Region, Iran's attempts to spread its revolution by print and radio media while condemning Al-Saud for injustice and hypocrisy have met a welcoming public.¹⁸⁵ An example of Iranian propaganda against Saudi Arabia was the one aired by Radio Tehran and was captured by the BBC in 1980 in which the programme compared the brutality of the shah's regime to that of the Saudis has the subject matter below:

*"When the people have self-confidence and high morale, they will begin to demand their rights and oppose the authorities' policy and conduct. Indeed, it is this which the corrupt monarchies fear most. This is why they always attempt to trample upon the people's dignity and morale, oppress them and subject them to ignominy in order to prevent the people from ever contemplating opposition and confrontations, and to make them yield and subjugate themselves to the ruling authorities. This is the nature of monarchy, which is rejected by Islam. This is what our people in the Arabian peninsula are suffering under al Saud's rule."*¹⁸⁶

The Saudi Shiites came together to break the ban on the public religious speech by conducting parades to commemorate Ashura Day on 28 November 1979. Public demonstrations in many towns and cities against government religious discrimination and economic inequality erupted.¹⁸⁷ The demonstrators displayed placards with portraits of the Iranian revolutionary leader, Khomeini while demanding the freeing of Shiites held in prisons. While Saudi Arabia sees the protests inspired by Iran as interference in its internal affairs, Iran, on the other hand, never considered it as such. As its foreign minister

¹⁸⁴ Joseph Fitchetz, "Paris Aid to Saudis Cited In Ending Mosque Siege," *The Washington Post*, 1980, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/28/paris-aid-to-saudis-cited-in-ending-mosque-siege/001469e6-c2da-4c07-97e1-772c46fe7966/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f937d17bdf54.

¹⁸⁵ Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, p. 170.

¹⁸⁶ Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*, 2001.

¹⁸⁷ Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, p. 171.

averred, the demonstrations “*could not be considered as interference in... internal affairs, since we consider the Islamic nation as one, and the Imam [Khomeini] is a religious leader. He is the leader of...all Islamic peoples.*”¹⁸⁸ The demonstration can be seen as a critical internal threat to the Saudi regime from Shiites. Therefore, the protest was considered severe enough to warrant the deployment of 20,000 troops to the region.¹⁸⁹

In 1987, an anti-American protest by Iranians led to clashes with Saudi security agents. Over 400 people died due to stampede.¹⁹⁰ Despite the substantial evidence, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani denied any Iranian involvement in the event. Instead, he blamed Saudi Arabia and called for the Saudi monarchy's overthrow as an act of revenge.¹⁹¹ Therefore, Riyadh suspended its relations with Iran for three years.¹⁹² Iran aimed at destabilising Saudi Arabia as well as opposed its rule over the holy site. Given the brazen call for spreading its revolution, Saudi Arabia felt threatened as it became a critical target of Iran's Islamic Republic.¹⁹³ Tehran's meddling in the kingdom's internal affairs coupled with the public appeal of the Islamic revolution threatens Saudi's regional role, thereby posing the threat of existential nature to the regime and the rest of the Arab Gulf states.¹⁹⁴

b. Iran in the 2000s

Saudi Arabia perceives a threat from Tehran's growing military capability, particularly its missile and nuclear programs. Its ballistic missiles deemed nuclear-capable give it a trump card over Saudi Arabia. Iran's military build-up through building its offensive capability kindles security dilemma in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf countries. Iran's show of force via conducting a military exercise in the Gulf shows that the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea may be the next contest zone. Given that the IRGC is playing roles that bring about instability in the region, Tehran's claim that its

¹⁸⁸ David Priess, “Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study,” *Security Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1996), p. 161, doi:10.1080/09636419608429291.

¹⁸⁹ Yetiv, “The Middle East in World Politics: The Rise of Saudi Arabia.”

¹⁹⁰ Gause, “Revolution and Threat Perception: Iran and the Middle East,” pp. 637–45.

¹⁹¹ Rubin, “The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War,” pp. 121–32.

¹⁹² Gause, “Revolution and Threat Perception: Iran and the Middle East,” pp. 637–45.

¹⁹³ Rubin, “The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War,” p. 123.

¹⁹⁴ Ahmadian, “Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Age of Trump,” p. 134.

military drills are defensive has been defeated.¹⁹⁵ The combined military of the GCC is mainly weak, despite being more sophisticated than Iran's. Through the GCC, Saudi Arabia tries to remedy its weakness by conducting military drills. They do, however, have flaws in their unified command and control systems. Previous drills have been hampered by technical and logistical issues that do not exist in Tehran's military. Iran's nuclear missiles will further upset the balance and lead Iran to regional leadership not just in the Gulf but in the Middle East. A ballistic missile attack is the most significant strategic threat to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab Gulf states. Still, success in building an integrated missile defence system has remained challenging.

Some of the missiles in Iranian inventory include both short to medium-range ballistic missiles. Shahab 1, 2 have a range of 350-500km range. Ghadr and Emad (Shahab 3 variants) are intermediate-range ballistic missiles with the range of 1500-2500km and 1700km, respectively. Qiam 1 is a short-range ballistic missile with a range of 700 to 800km. There is also the presence of cruise missiles (Sourmar) with a 2000-3000km range.¹⁹⁶ Houthi rebels have used it against strategic targets in Riyadh.¹⁹⁷ The Houthi rebels have launched more than 34 ballistic missiles from Iran into Saudi Arabia since 2015.¹⁹⁸ Khorramshahr (based on North Korean Musudan BM25 medium-range ballistic missile with a range of 2000 km) is currently being developed. Given the proximity of Iran to Saudi Arabia, which is less than a thousand kilometres, Saudi Arabia is within Iran's missiles range. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' chief commander, Mohammad Ali Jafari recalled the presence of missiles with 2,000 kilometres range in Iran's offensive arsenal that can destroy targets with "delicate precision". In essence, all American bases in the Gulf are within the range of Iranian missiles.¹⁹⁹ For this reason, most of the arms Saudi Arabia bought focused on improving

¹⁹⁵ Abdullah K. Alshayji, "Mutual Realities, Perceptions, and Impediments Between The Gcc States and Iran," *Security in the Gulf*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2002, pp. 232, doi:10.1057/9780230108189_11.

¹⁹⁶ Missile Defense Project, *Missiles of Iran, Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018.

¹⁹⁷ "Press Release: Ambassador Haley on Weapons of Iranian Origin Used in Attack on Saudi Arabia," *United States Mission in the United Nations*, 2017, <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/8090>.

¹⁹⁸ IHS Markit, "Yemeni Rebels Enhance Ballistic Missile Campaign," 2017, https://www.janes.com/images/assets/330/72330/Yemeni_rebels_enhance_ballistic_missile_campaign.pdf.

¹⁹⁹ Carmon Yigal, A. Savyon, "IRGC Commander Jafari In Message Meant To Reassure Europe: Right Now, We Are Settling For Missiles With 2,000-Km Range – A Range That Covers U.S. Forces In The Region," *Inquiry & Analysis Series*, no. 1357 (2017), <https://www.memri.org/reports/irgc-commander-jafari-message-meant-reassure-europe-right-now-we-are-settling-missiles-2000>.

its defence capabilities. Its Patriot missile defence system and the proposed THAAD system will increase its ability to support and defend itself from Iranian ballistic missiles.²⁰⁰

Should Iran acquire nuclear weapon capability, Saudi Arabia feared that its military capability would be limited in deterring Iran. Already Iran poses a military challenge to the region; its acquisition of nuclear capability may increase the level of military threat in the Gulf.²⁰¹ Saudi's fear does not just stem from Iran having a military edge over it or may lead to nuclear proliferation in the region, but it fears Iran's domination of the Middle East to its disadvantage. Consequently, the kingdom may *"suffer a sense of political humiliation that the Iranians have the political prestige or reputation for power that accompanies nuclear weapons."*²⁰² Rosemary Hollis averred that

*"one has to understand that the concern about Iran going nuclear or having a weapon capability has to do not only with the threat that would pose not only with proliferation in the region, but also the sense that it would enable Iran to act with impunity in regional politics in extending its influence in Iraq and also, probably Lebanon."*²⁰³

Saudi Arabia purchased and continue to buy enough modern weapons. But the misfortune is, the weapons alone cannot deter Iran. The psychology of a rentier state does not contribute to the military prowess of Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab Gulf states. Consequently, getting out of a situation like this requires hired troops. Even though King Abdullah was pursuing a cautious, thoughtful policy, the monarch urged the United States to attack Iran to "cut off the snake's head", according to Wikileaks leaked diplomatic cables in 2008.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Thomas, "Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy."

²⁰¹ Richard L Russell, "Peering Over the Horizon: Arab Threat Perception and Security Responses to a Nuclear-Ready Iran," no. March (2004), p. 8.

²⁰² *ibid.*

²⁰³ Robert Tait, "WikiLeaks Cables Suggest Arab Fears Over Iran Mirror Israel's," 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/wikileaks_cables_us_leak_iran_arab_israel/2234156.html.

²⁰⁴ Ross Colvin, "Cut off Head of Snake Saudis Told U.S. on Iran," *Reuters*, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wikileaks-iran-saudis/cut-off-head-of-snake-saudis-told-u-s-on-iran-idUSTRE6AS02B20101129>.

The threat Saudi Arabia perceived from Iran's nuclear programme does not only stem from its fear of Iran acquiring nuclear weapon capability or having more influence in the region. The nuclear plant's location at Bushehr is not more than 300 kilometres from Saudi Arabia's shores. Therefore, an accident in the plant will harm the Jubail desalinization complex, which is said to be the main water supply of the kingdom. Prince Turki al-Kabir stressed that *"the location [of the nuclear plant] is dangerous not only to us but to the world economy"* as a leak will result in "environmental catastrophe."²⁰⁵ The desalinization plant is essential to Saudi Arabia capital as it supplies 90% of its daily water needs. As Michael Gfoeller suggested, *"Riyadh would have to evacuate within a week... the current structure of the Saudi government could not exist without the Jubail Desalinization Plant."*²⁰⁶

2. Saudi Arabia and Iraq

One of the primary sources of threat for Saudi Arabia emanated from the ideological tension from the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, especially the coming of the Ba'ath Party to power and the building of the Iraqi military. The consolidation of Baath rule at the beginning of the 1970s came with the radicalisation of Iraq's foreign policy. Moreover, in terms of aggregate power, Iraq had more superior strength than Saudi Arabia. Its fears increased when the Iraq-Soviet agreement was signed in 1972. Immediately after the agreement, arms transfers from the USSR flowed to Iraq, which was the building block for its aggression towards Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. By 1980, Iraq's capability consists of 242,250 men in its military with a \$2.7 billion defence budget. Although Saudi Arabia's defence expenditure was \$20bn in 1980, its army's size is a mere, 47,000 men.

In certain ways, Iraq's Baath philosophy, anti-monarchical, pan-Arabist, and socialist, became the antithesis of the kingdom's constitutional order. Baghdad's incessant efforts to subvert the Saudi regime and other Arab Gulf monarchies transformed Iraq into an existential challenge to the kingdom and what it regarded as its area of influence. For

²⁰⁵ Brett Walton, "Plumbing WikiLeaks: Saudi Arabia Fears Iranian Nuclear Meltdown and Potential Terrorism to Desalination," *Circle of Blue*, 2011, <https://www.circleofblue.org/2011/world/plumbing-wikileaks-saudi-arabia-fears-iranian-nuclear-meltdown-and-potential-terrorism-to-desalination/>.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

example, during the Oman civil war, Iraq supported the Dhofar rebels, which is against the interest of Saudi Arabia. In addition to this, the kingdom itself has been a target for Iraqi subversion. Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz, the Saudi minister for the interior, was reported to have reported of an Iraqi financial and arms support for Bedouin sheikhs to go against the Saudi regime to the American ambassador in 1971. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was concerned over Iraq's subversive activities in the newly independent states of Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE in September 1971.²⁰⁷

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia perceived Iraq as deliberately surrounding it by supporting forces against the monarchy in its neighbourhood. For example, Iraq supported the Marxist regime in South Yemen who were counter to the Saudi-backed regime in the northeast of Yemen. It also supported the Popular Front of the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf insurgents in Oman.²⁰⁸ The above postures by Iraq increased Saudi Arabia's perception of the Iraqi threat.

Despite the political consensus of 1975 and the moderate policies of Iraq, uncertainty and mistrust continued. Following the Algiers agreement, Iraq and Saudi Arabia's relations became warm. However, Riyadh was concerned by Baghdad's desires to influence the Arab Gulf states, its support for Ba'athist, its anti-American posture and warm relations with the USSR. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia took advantage of the Algiers agreement to machinate between its key treats (Iraq and Iran) for its interest. For example, Saudi Arabia used *"Iraq to frustrate the shah's schemes to institutionalise his hegemonic aspirations through a Gulf collective defence pact, and to use Iran to check Iraq's aspiration to become the centre of an alignment of the Arab countries of the Gulf."*

Nevertheless, that did not stop Saudi Arabia from bankrolling Iraq during its war with Iran because Riyadh perceived the threat of Iran, which came in the form of both military superiority and its rhetoric of exporting its Islamic revolution to its neighbours. A form of aggressive intention per Walt's postulation. Iraq also possesses a large arsenal of Scud missiles used against Saudi Arabia in 1991 during the Gulf war.

²⁰⁷ Rieger, "The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990."

²⁰⁸ Joseph Mcmillan, "Saudi Arabia and Iraq Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry," 2006, www.usip.org.

a. Saudi Arabia and Iraq During the Gulf War

In 1990, Iraq's aggregate military strength rose to 1,000,000 men, 689 combat-ready aircraft, 5,500 main battle tanks, 6,000 armoured personnel carriers, some stockpile of some tactical ballistic missiles, chemical and biological weapons, and a nuclear weapons programme which by default constituted a threat to Saudi Arabia. A direct threat to the Saudi government stemmed from Iraq, with its occupation of Kuwait in 1990. Iraq ousted a neighbouring royal family and concentrated its forces around the Saudi border, and later crept up to five miles into Saudi territories many times. Although Saddam assured the Saudis that he did not wish to attack it in the initial period of the conflict, the Saudi regime had little faith in Baghdad's goodwill. As a result, the Saudi leaders feared they might face a similar fate as the Kuwaitis and chose to embrace the US's protection.²⁰⁹ King Fahd saw Iraq's actions as '*the most sinister aggression witnessed by the Arab nation in its modern history.*'²¹⁰ In a similar statement, the Saudi minister of defence, Prince Sultan, also voiced his fears of Iraq's aggressions; in his words, the invasion was '*the most horrendous aggression known by the Arab nation against a sister Arab country.*'²¹¹

Moreover, during the crisis, the territory of Saudi Arabia was repeatedly shelled by Iraq. At the end of January 1991, the Saudi town of Ras al-Khafji was seized by Iraqi units. Ras al-Khafji was chosen as a target by Iraq because Saddam believed its ports would be utilised as a base by coalition forces. Moreover, attacking the city will make the coalition forces in the Gulf feel threatened. Additionally, the town was within the range of Iraqi artillery forces in Kuwait.²¹² Saddam's plan for Ras al-Khafji town was not just its mere seizure but its continued capture of the oil fields of Dammam.²¹³ Ras al-Khafji is seen as the most significant battles with enemy forces Saudi Arabia had in its history.

²⁰⁹ Gregory F. Gause, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf," *Security Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2003), p. 289, doi:10.1080/09636410490521271.

²¹⁰ Jerry.M Long, *Saddam's War of Words*, 2004, p. 41.

²¹¹ *ibid.*

²¹² William P. Head, "The Battle for Ra's Al-Khafji and the Effects of Air Power," 2013, <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Airmen-at-War/Head-BattleKhafji-AirPower-Part1and2.pdf?ver=2016-08-22-131212-117>.

²¹³ *ibid.*

b. Saudi Arabia and Iraq Since 2000

The destruction of Iraqi military capability and the imposition of heavy economic sanctions on the country generated a gradual degradation of the political-military capacity of that state and its ability to order the relations between regional actors. In the year 2000, the Iraqi military strength size was 429,000 with 650,000 reserves with experience in warfighting. Iraq also had 417 combat-ready aircraft (equal to Saudi Arabia) and some arsenal of missiles in its stock, while Saudi Arabia's military strength is less than half of Iraq's (126,000 active men).²¹⁴ Iraq's ability to project power reduced, plus Iraq has been under sanctions and a no-fly zone imposed on its northern and southern part. Therefore, Saudi Arabia did not consider Iraq threatening because it cannot project its strength outside its territory. Although Saudi Arabia was opposed to Saddam Hussein, it saw Iraq as important in balancing Iran. Iraq's role in regional security stability was undeniable, as it serves as a buffer separating the Saudi and Iranian territories. The Iraq invasion by the US and deposing of Saddam in 2003 led to the total collapse of the Iraqi military, tipped the balance of power in the Gulf, and the threat it posed to Saudi Arabia has been thawed temporarily. Given that the war reduced Iraq's military strength, the threat perceived from that angle is on hold for at least a decade.²¹⁵

Nevertheless, post-2003, Iraq still poses a threat to Saudi Arabia on at least two grounds. Firstly, having a pro-Iranian Shia government in the Saudis backyard poses a threat to it, given that the Saudis arch enemy in the region is Iran. Since the war, Iran deeply intervened in Iraq's security-related internal affairs and expanded its sphere of influence. By 2005, the prospect of creating a so-called "Shiite crescent" was outlined as part of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Moreover, the government that came to power in Iraq in January 2005 was dominated by representatives of the Shi'a *Da'awa* party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Ahrar Moqtada al-Sadr movement. Consequently, this marked the growth of Iranian political influence in Baghdad and the transformation of Iraq into the first Shiite state in the history of the Arab world. The events in Iraq were accompanied by the strengthening of the Iranian-Syrian strategic

²¹⁴ "Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 100, no. 1 (2000), pp. 127–57, doi:10.1080/04597220008460143.

²¹⁵ Piriñçi, "ABD-Suudi Arabistan Silah Anlaşması," p. 65.

partnership and the increasing influence of the Hezbollah movement. At the same time, the coming to power of the Shiites would have been impossible without the assistance of the American occupation administration, who tried to ensure the security of the American troops by empowering the Shiite majority. This circumstance was the reason for the weakening of confidence in Saudi-American relations. The signing of the Iran-Iraq military cooperation agreement of July 7, 2005, caused great discontent in Riyadh. The Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Saud Al-Faisal noted that

*“The Iranians now go in this pacified area that the American forces have pacified, and they go into every government of Iraq, pay money, install their own people, put their own—even establish police forces for them, arms and militias that are there and reinforce their presence in these areas. And they are being protected in doing this by the British and the American forces in the area.... [T]o us it seems out of this world that you do this. We fought a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason.”*²¹⁶

Moreover, King Abdullah privately gave a vent on the American government given that, *“whereas in the past the US, Saudi Arabia and Saddam Hussein had agreed on the need to contain Iran, US policy had now given Iraq to Iran as a ‘gift on a golden platter.’”*²¹⁷

Secondly, with Saddam eliminated, Saudis fears is not from the Iraqi state but from terrorist that had taken advantage of the chaotic situation in Iraq since its invasion by the US. As Joseph McMillan averred,

*“The Saudi government’s biggest fear is that disorder will spillt [sic] over its own borders in the form of experienced, battle-trained fighters who can easily infiltrate into the kingdom, bringing with them newly honed skills in bomb-making and other aspects of insurgent warfare and joining with al Qaeda elements already active in Saudi Arabia.”*²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace, 2007.

²¹⁷ David E. Sanger, James Glanz, Jo Becker, “Around the World, Distress Over Iran,” *The New York Times*, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/world/middleeast/29iran.html?pagewanted=all>.

²¹⁸ Joseph McMillan, “Saudi Arabia and Iraq Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry,” *United States Institute Of Peace*, 2008, p. 3, Doi: May, 01, 2016.

The dramatic worsening of relations between the two main Middle Eastern regional actors was facilitated by the changes in the Middle East in 2003–2006. To a large extent, they related to the adventurous, unilateral actions of the United States that changed the region's political map. The main reason was the American occupation of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, after which the growth of Iranian influence in Iraq began with the prospect of reformatting the regional political map. As a result, by 2005, the prospect of creating a so-called “*Shiite crescent*” was outlined as part of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

B. BALANCING STRATEGIES

1. Internal Balancing Strategies: Armament (MILEX and Arms Transfers)

Strategies nations opt for while balancing a threat from the internal balancing strand include producing arms locally. In the case of such an industrial base is lacking, a country should opt for Arms transfers as a form of armament from bigger powers due to this urgent need to balance the threat perceived, especially when there is an impending danger. Whatever strategy is chosen, a rise in the defence budget should be noticed. Saudi Arabia lacked the human resources to build advanced weapons. Therefore, when the level of its threat perceptions increased at times of crises, Saudi Arabia opted for arms transfers from its allies as a strategy to balance the threats perceived. Since the Iranian revolution and the war that ensued between Tehran and Bagdad, Saudi Arabia’s defence budget increased. During the Iran-Iraq War years, Saudi Arabia increased its military expenditure from \$133,384 million to \$270,225, representing a 138% increase in its defence outlays (See table 2 below).

<i>Table 2: Military Expenditure of Saudi Arabia from 1971-2010</i>				
	1971-80	1981-90	1991-2000	2001-10
MILEX	113,384	270,225	257,970	412,213
% Change		138.3	-4.5	59.8
Data Source: SIPRI MILEX expressed in million USD.				

In the 1970s, US arms sales to Saudi Arabia was \$3.477 billion and 76.84% of its total arms import, according to SIPRI data. The war between Iran and Iraq has led to US military aid and weapons transfers to Saudi Arabia. The ties between Saudi Arabia and

the United States were strengthened, and 5 AWACS aircraft and sidewinder missiles of \$400m were transferred to Saudi Arabia in 1981. This link was made possible since Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab monarchs in the Gulf knew that they could not counter direct attack from Iran or Iraq due to their military weakness. Moreover, Saudi's vulnerability was further exposed when Iranian aircraft penetrated the Saudi airspace undetected. Therefore, to counter this vulnerability, the US supplied F-5 Reconnaissance and trainer aircraft at the cost of \$35m to Saudi Arabia in 1982. In 1984, two Saudi F-15s shot down two Iranian F4 fighters flying over Saudi airspace during the war, thanks to the US arms transfers.²¹⁹

During the decade of the Iran-Iraq War, arms transferred to Saudi Arabia increased from \$4.525 billion in the 1970s decade to \$16.144 billion in the 1980s. The increase accounts for 207.6 per cent (**see Table 3 below**). Despite the US Senate's rejections to sell arms to Saudi Arabia during the 1980s, the US tops Saudi Arabia arms transfer with \$9,568 billion and 55.9 per cent of total arms transfer when expressed in percentage. In 1985, the US's attempt to sell extra 48 units of F-15 fighter aircraft was met with resistance and pressure from the Israeli lobby group and later vetoed by Congress.²²⁰ Moreover, in 1986 a \$354 million deal to transfer Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, Harpoon air-to-ship missiles and stingers missiles were voted down by the Regan administration. The Israeli lobby, the fear that stringers could end up in the hands of terrorist and the feelings of the public that Saudi "had not helped the [Israeli] peace process" are some of the reasons for voting against the sales.²²¹ The US's unwillingness to sell some weapons system to the kingdom pushed the Saudi government to diversify its weapons sources. It acquired surface to air missiles and Tornado fighter jets from France and Britain, respectively.²²²

²¹⁹ Nawaf Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine: Mapping the Expanded Force Structure the Kingdom Needs to Lead the Arab World, Stabilize the Region, and Meet Its Global Responsibilities," 2014, <http://belfercenter.org>.

²²⁰ Global Security, "Saudi Arabian F-15 Peace Sun."

²²¹ Steven V. Roberts, "President Vetoes Effort to Block Arms for Saudis," *The New York Times*, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/22/world/president-vetoes-effort-to-block-arms-for-saudis.html>.

²²² Ferhat Pirinççi, "ABD-Suudi Arabistan Silah Anlaşması," *Akademik Orta Doğu*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2011), p. 64.

Table 3: Total Arms Transfer to Saudi Arabia: 1971 to 2010

Years	1971-80	1981-90	1991-2000	2001-10
Arms Transferred (USD)	5,565	17,116	15,583	4,866
Percentage		207.6	-8.9	-68.8

Data Source: SIPRI TIV

By transferring \$3,832 billion worth of weapons to the kingdom, France became the second arms exporter to Saudi Arabia during the war. This figure accounts for 22.4% of the total arms transferred to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s.

With a \$2,610 arms transfer, the UK is the third arms exporter to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Its arms transfer to Saudi Arabia in the decade of the war accounts for 15.25 per cent. When the US Congress voted down arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 1985, Britain, with the blessing of the US, keenly took measures to pick up the slack with 72 Tornado fighter jets²²³ via the Al Yamamah I, which is a \$7 billion arms deal signed in 1985 between Saudi Arabia and the UK. Moreover, as part of the agreement, Britain transferred 30 Hawks, 102 anti-ship missiles, 250 alarm missiles etc.

Saudi Arabia did not exclusively rely on the West for arms. From China, the first significant arms transfer to Saudi Arabia was 50 units of DF-3/CSS-2 medium-range surface to air missiles that are nuclear-capable in a \$3.5 billion deal that was signed in 1986.²²⁴ The deal was made possible due to the US reluctance to sell some missiles because of Israeli opposition. The nuclear-capable missiles sent to Saudi Arabia between 1987 and 1988 were modified to carry a conventional payload.²²⁵

Arms transfer to Saudi Arabia continued to increase in the 1990s. As stated above, the primary driver for arms expenditure here is Iraq's threat due to its invasion of Kuwait. Both Saudi Arabia and its key arms supplier are not happy with the invasion. The mutual threat perception between the kingdom and its security guarantor meant an increase in arms expenditure. However, the defeat of Saddam in the war did not diminish Saudis military expenditure. Hence, a re-emergence of armament as Saudi Arabia's arms

²²³ Hirst, *The Arabian Connection: The UK Arms Trade to Saudi Arabia*.

²²⁴ Minnie Chan, "Chinese Drone Factory in Saudi Arabia First in the Middle East," *South China Morning Post*, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2081869/chinese-drone-factory-saudi-arabia-first-middle-east>.

²²⁵ Ethan Meick, "China's Reported Ballistic Missile Sale to Saudi Arabia: Background and Potential Implications," 2014, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>;

expenditure increased from \$26.5 billion in 1997 to over \$32 billion in 2001.²²⁶ There was an 8.91% decrease in its total arms import in the 1990s (see **table 3 above**). US arms to Saudi Arabia stood at \$11,922 billion (see **table 4 below**), which is 76.5% of its total imports in the 1990s. Some of the significant arms deals include a \$9 billion contract (sealed in 1992) to supply 72 units of F-15E Strike Eagle delivered between 1995 and 1999. Moreover, in 1992, in a \$1 billion deal, Saudi Arabia acquired some 13 Patriot SAM system, and delivery was made between 1995 and 1997.²²⁷

Table 4: Top Three Arms Transfers to Saudi Arabia: 1971 to Present

Years	1971-80	1981-90	1991-2000	2001-10	2011-2020	Total
US	4,117	9,568	11,922	1,889	17,252	44,748
Britain	86	2,610	2,470	1,037	4,254	10,456
France	1,236	3,832	456	1,346	1,131	8,001
Canada	-	-	405	68	601	1,092
Switzerland	96	162	279	50	320	907

Data Source: SIPRI TIV. All figures expressed in USD

The UK arms transfer to Saudi Arabia increased compared to the previous decade. With \$2,440 billion worth of arms transferred, Britain's arms transfer constitutes 15.9% of Saudi's total that decade. Under the Al Yamamah II deal signed in 1993, the UK agreed to transfer \$17 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia. Under the agreement, 48, including six reconnaissance version of Tornado fighters and 20 Hawk 60s, were delivered to Saudi Arabia. France accounts for 4.14% of the arms transferred to the kingdom in the 1990s. Some of the weapons transferred include 140 TS-90 90mm Tanks, 249 HOT-2 Anti-tank missile etc., ordered and delivered between 1990 and 1997.²²⁸ However, since 1998 there was a noticeable decrease in Saudi's arms expenditure resulting from the decline in the price of crude oil in the world market.²²⁹

In the first decade of the 2000s, Saudi's arms transfer dropped to become the lowest since the 1970s. The entire arms transferred to Saudi Arabia was \$4,866 (68.8% decrease compared to the 1990s) in the early 2000s, according to SIPRI data (see **table 4**

²²⁶ Jarosław Jarzabek, "GCC Military Spending in Era of Low Oil Prices," *Middle East Institute*, 2016, p. 11.

²²⁷ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018," n.d., http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php.

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ Ferhat Pirinççi, "ABD-Suudi Arabistan Silah Anlaşması," *Akademik Orta Doğu*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2011), p. 65.

above). The US's overall arms export to Saudi Arabia dropped from \$11,922 in the 1990s to \$889 from 2001 to 2010. Nevertheless, the US arms transfer in the decade remained the highest with 38.8%. Issues like the world trade centre attack in the US and the ensuing "Global War on Terror" did not lead to a rise in Saudi Arabia's arms expenditure as the spending between 2001 and 2003 declined. At the beginning to middle of the first decade of the 2000s, there were no arms deals between Saudi Arabia, the US. In essence, Saudi Arabia shifted away from the American sphere as far as armament is concerned.²³⁰ Upon resumption of arms transfer from the US to Saudi Arabia in 2006, in a \$10 billion deal, the US transferred hundreds of light-armoured vehicles, 58 M1A1 MBT Abrams tanks.²³¹ However, the invasion of Iraq by the US can be said to have caused an extraordinary rise in military spending in the region. Saudi Arabia, for example, increased its expenditure from \$31 in 2004 to \$52 billion in 2010.²³²

France is the second arms exporter to Saudi Arabia in this period. Its arms transfer accounted for \$1,346 and 27.7% of Saudis arms import between 2001 and 2010. In a EUR 500m deal, France transferred 1000 Mistral Portable Surface to Air Missile to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, six AS565M Panther Helicopter and 80 CAESAR 155mm Self-propelled guns were transferred to Saudi Arabia.²³³

With \$456 arms transfers in the first decade of the 2000s, the UK arms to Saudi Arabia stood at 21.3%. In 2005, the Al Salam arms deal (an 11-year deal worth 4.43 billion pounds) was signed between the UK government and Saudi Arabia to supply 72 Eurofighter (typhoons) jets. During this period, 24 units of Typhoon bloc 20, and the supply of Typhoon block eight between 2007 and 2008.²³⁴ From 2005 to 2009, British arms transfer to Saudi Arabia rose by 42%, while the US dropped by 40%.²³⁵ Thus, UK and Frances arms transfer can be said to have complemented the US arms during the

²³⁰ *ibid.*

²³¹ "Chapter Five: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 110, no. 1 (2010), p. 242. doi:10.1080/04597220903545841.

²³² Jarzabek, "GCC Military Spending in Era of Low Oil Prices," p. 11.

²³³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018."

²³⁴ *ibid.*

²³⁵ Piriñçi, "ABD-Suudi Arabistan Silah Anlaşması," p. 68.

period Saudi was not receiving US arms. France, UK and other European suppliers transferred \$27.300 worth of weapons from 2000 to 2007.²³⁶

Moreover, Saudi Arabia bought weapons worth \$66m from China by the end of the 2000s. China's arms transfer accounted for 1.4 per cent that decade, according to SIPRI TIV data. Fifty-four units of PLZ-45 155mm Self-propelled guns were transferred to Saudi Arabia between 2008-2009. In addition, with the approval of the CIA, DF-21 missiles were secretly transferred to Saudi Arabia in 2007.²³⁷

In 2008, Riyadh and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement. Moreover, in 2009, following Russia's delegation visit to Saudi Arabia, it was expected in a \$2 billion deal to include up to 150 helicopters, over 150 T-90S tanks, air-defence missile systems etc. Moreover, the supply of S-400 air-defence systems and Mi-28 helicopters were discussed.²³⁸

2. External Balancing Strategies

a. Regional Alignment: Saudi Arabia, the GCC and Iran-Iraq War

While both Saudi Arabia and Iran worked together against revisionist and anti-status quo regimes such as Iraq, Egypt and Syria, Saudi Arabia was nevertheless apprehensive of Iran due to its hegemonic ambitions, which Washington supported. Until the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia sought to offset Iranian control and influence by engaging in Egypt via economic means. It saw the Sadat regime as a major bulwark to Iran at the regional level. At the same time, Riyadh became instrumental in removing Iran's military in Oman, where Riyadh viewed this as Iranian interference in its control area. Then, in March 1976, Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and then mediated an agreement between the republic and Oman that would end its support for the rebellion in exchange for the removal of foreign forces from Oman. To this effect, Iran's military presence in Oman

²³⁶ Richard F. Grimmett, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2000-2007," *Congressional Research Service*, 2008, p. 53, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL34723.pdf>.

²³⁷ Zachary Keck, "China Secretly Sold Saudi Arabia DF-21 Missiles With CIA Approval," *The Diplomat*, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/china-secretly-sold-saudi-arabia-df-21-missiles-with-cia-approval/>.

²³⁸ "Chapter Five: Middle East and North Africa," p. 241.

was somewhat removed by January 1977.²³⁹ The strong US support for the Shah's Gulf security plan disturbed the Saudi regime. Therefore, its inclination to balance Tehran and improve its Washington position led Riyadh to align its oil policy to the U.S. economic interests.²⁴⁰

During the war, Riyadh became concerned with Tehran and Baghdad as it considered both revisionist and capable of changing the status quo and the region's balance of power. To protect against the export of the Islamic revolution to other countries in the region, Saudi Arabia took several measures against Iran, one of which was cooperation with Iraq. According to Walt, offensive countries are more likely to oppose countries with a stance of status quo maintenance.²⁴¹ Saudi Arabia's stance during the Iran-Iraq War was affected by the level of threat it perceived from Iran. The strength of the Iranian military constituted some 240,000 men with 400,000 reserves while that of Iraq stood at 242,250 armed men according to the IISS military balance of 1980.

Saudi Arabia's choice of balancing Iran by aligning to Iraq can be understood to have come not from the states' strength but from the perceptions of threat from the aggressive Iranian intentions and offensive capability, which translates to its power to stir uprisings in and around the Saudi state since the 1979 revolution. Comparing the aggregate power, aggressive intentions, offensive power and geographical proximity of Iraq and Iran, one finds that apart from geographical proximity, as it shares a border with Saudi Arabia, the rest of the factors constituting threat favours Iran. To put it differently, Iran owns and used tools such as the rhetoric of delegitimizing the Saudi monarchy and its attempt to export its revolution threatened Saudi Arabia. This was complicated because Saudi Arabia has a significant number of Shiites in its eastern province who found the revolution in Iran worthy of emulation. Moreover, Iran supported its course through media propaganda when it started revolting against the state following inspiration from Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.

It is noteworthy that, Iraq too, had some aggressive intentions towards the Gulf monarchies yet, the fear of Iraq was softened due to Iraq's moderation of its stance

²³⁹ Saeed M Badeeb, *Saudi-Iranian Relations 1932-1982*, London: Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies, 1993.

²⁴⁰ Rieger, "The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990."

²⁴¹ Stephen M. Walt, "Balancing Threat: The United States and the Middle East," *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 2010, p. 10, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190611477.003.0011.

towards Saudi Arabia since the Algiers accord. There was fear due to the initial success of Iraq at the beginning of the war. However, as the war continues, the threat began to be seen from both parties. The Saudi block created the GCC while excluding both Iraq and Iran from the arrangement because it threatened Saudi Arabia because it could spread. Moreover, a victory won by any of the parties will create a well-armed and determined regime that may influence Saudi Arabia and its allies. Also, Tehran and Baghdad's ideologies and political systems are inconsistent with those of the GCC states. Lastly, the victory of Iran would improve its ability to overthrow the governments in the GCC states.

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Although Iran became weaker with the revolution while Iraq became stronger, its aggressive intention of exporting its revolution to its Arab neighbours pushed Saudi Arabia to support Iraq during the war that lasted eight years. The Gulf states see Saddam as less threatening²⁴³ and the saviour of Arabs because of the magnitude of Iran's threat due to its harsh rhetoric against the Saudi monarchy in particular. Put differently, Iran's threat to the internal security of Saudi Arabia was immediate. Over the course of the war, Iraq became more moderate and denounced much of its activities, such as pan Arabism and militancy. The war made Iraq more dependent on the money, financial and technical support of the GCC countries.²⁴⁴ Iran, on the other hand, was militant and maintained rhetoric of extremism against Saudi Arabia. For this reason, Saudi Arabia and the other GCC members renewed their attitudes towards the war and aligned with the US.²⁴⁵

By Walt's assertion, states form a coalition against a state they perceive as threatening to them. The perception factor played a great role in determining Saudi Arabia's supporting Iraq against Iran during the war. Iran no doubt constituted threat which has both external and internal effect on Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Saudi Arabia staying on the side of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War could be seen in Saudis' perception of Baghdad as less aggressive. This is in line with Walt's argument that states can accommodate the rise of a nonaggressive neighbour.²⁴⁶ Iraq's non-aggressiveness came

²⁴² Barry Rubin, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War," *The Iran-Iraq War*, ed. by Efraim Karsh, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989, pp. 123-125, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-20050-4_9.

²⁴³ Gause, "Revolution and Threat Perception: Iran and the Middle East," pp. 637-45.

²⁴⁴ Rubin, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War," pp. 124-125.

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*.

²⁴⁶ Stephen M. Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 91, no. 4 (1997), p. 933, doi:10.2307/2952177.

due to its moderating its behaviours since the Algiers accords signed in 1975. Because the war offered an impending existential threat to Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia like the other small Gulf states, felt less threatened by Iraq, they bankrolled Iraq during the war. Through the GCC, Saudi Arabia made extensive use of its capabilities during the Iran-Iraq war to transfer intelligence information, arms supply, and finances to Baghdad, making the conflict the longest and with the highest death toll in Middle East's history. The kingdom transhipped materiel to Baghdad and supplied \$6 billion in direct financial aid in 1981 and an extra \$4 billion by the end of 1981. Between 1981 to 1983, Saudi Arabia was estimated to have invested about 20 billion dollars in non-oil assistance to Iraq.²⁴⁷

Saudi Arabia's tactics in the confrontation with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war often changed depending on hostilities and the warring parties' situation. In 1983-1985, Riyadh, on the one hand, called for the settlement of the conflict by diplomatic methods. On the other, it increased pressure on Iran by conducting military exercises in the Strait of Hormuz and purchased arms from France, the USA, and the USSR. Saudi support for Iraq continued as it felt more threatened while witnessing the Iranian invasion of Faw in 1986. This development led Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states to invest more in Iraqi weapons. Iraq accrued \$40 billion in debt to the GCC states. Saudi Arabian share of the debt while funding Iraq was \$28 billion.²⁴⁸ Iraqi support has made Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries a potential target for attack by Iran. Iran has repeatedly threatened Saudi Arabia for the support it is giving to Iraq and attacks its shipping. This action led Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to lead a GCC initiative to condemn Iran's actions. Moreover, through the GCC, a UN resolution condemning Iran's actions was initiated. During this period, the Saudi Airforce downed an Iranian F4 jet that was flying over the territorial waters of Saudi Arabia.²⁴⁹

b. Saudi Arabia and Iraq during the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

During the Iraq aggression on Kuwait, Saudi Arabia was quick and decisive due to the real threat perceived from Saddam's action. Moreover, the Kingdom was

²⁴⁷ Gerd Nonneman, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities," *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2004, p. 175.

²⁴⁸ Mcmillan, "Saudi Arabia and Iraq Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry."

²⁴⁹ Nonneman, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities," 2004, pp. 167–92.

surrounded by countries sympathetic to Saddam Hussein's regime and associated with it, such as Yemen and Jordan. Among other things, Iran could well take advantage of the situation and gain in the new geopolitical situation. Therefore, in Riyadh, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was regarded as a betrayal of a friend and ally. On August 2, 1990, a meeting of the Arab League was held, which adopted resolution 3036, recognized the invasion of Iraqi troops in fraternal Kuwait by aggression with the presence of victims and destruction demand the immediate withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwaiti territory.²⁵⁰

The Arab League decided to create a coalition of Arab and Muslim countries for Kuwait's liberation and transfer coalition troops to the territory of Saudi Arabia to protect the borders of states and regional security from external invasion. The de jure government of Kuwait, led by Emir Jaber al-Sabah, was also temporarily transferred to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia significantly strengthened its position and authority among the Arab countries. Both Saudi Arabia's and the international community's effort to resolve the aggression failed. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has not hesitated on seeking the help of extra-regional allies, the US in particular. Riyadh took an active part in creating a broad international coalition. And it was Saudi Arabia that in 1991 became the important regional partner of Washington, giving the US and coalition forces military bases. The Saudi government allowed the temporary deployment of thousands of American and allied military forces under "Operation Desert Shield" to Saudi territory. The operation main mission is to protect Saudi Arabian territory and stop Iraq from advancing further to Saudi Arabia.²⁵¹ On January 17, 1991, by the UN Security Council's decision, a multinational force of anti-Iraq coalition launched military operations under the code name "Operation Desert Storm".²⁵²

The political objectives of the desert storm operation were to liberate Kuwait and return power to the legitimate government, and restoring stability in the Gulf region. The military objectives of the operation were to destroy Iraq's military potential, which threatens not just the Gulf states but also Israel and the rest of the countries of the Middle

²⁵⁰ Elihu Lauterpacht, C. J. Greenwood, Marc Weller, *The Kuwait Crisis: Basic Documents*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 293.

²⁵¹ Joseph Kostiner, "Part Two: The Iraq-Kuwait Conflict," *Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region*, ed. by Joseph Kostiner, Vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, p. 117.

²⁵² "Gulf War Fast Facts," *CNN Library*, (03/24/2019), <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/15/world/meast/Gulf-war-fast-facts/index.html>.

East and to deprive Iraq of the ability to produce nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.²⁵³ Operation Desert Storm envisaged the combat use of multinational forces as part of an “air-land-naval campaign” that included an air-offensive operation, an air-ground offensive operation and a naval landing operation. The alliance received more than 800,000 troops, of which over 500,000 are American soldiers with the consent of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.²⁵⁴

The Saudi government provided coalition forces with bases, food and fuel to conduct air campaign against Iraq.²⁵⁵ In the battle for the liberation of Ras al-Khafji, Saudi military forces played an active role in the military operations against Saddam. It is said that Saudi Airforce conducted over 7000 sorties.²⁵⁶ The incremental cost of the war amounted to \$61 billion, of which Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states provided \$36 billion.²⁵⁷

c. Extra-regional Alignment: Saudi Arabia’s Compact with the US

The Saudi Arabia-USA partnership was built and consolidated in the Cold War context (1945-1991) and represents the main element of Saudi foreign policy at the global level. The alignment of interests resulted from the American strategic vision in the region, especially due to its energy potential in the post-war period. Diplomatic contact between King ibn Saud and President Franklin Roosevelt denoted, in 1945, a willingness to cooperate in the formation of the new world order. Subsequently, the newly formulated Truman Doctrine reaffirmed the mutual commitment to curb Soviet influence, allowing the Military Assistance Mission’s establishment between Saudis and Americans to train and accompany the country’s armed forces.²⁵⁸

Within only weeks after the Algiers agreement, Iraq and Saudi Arabia’s relations became warm. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia was concerned over Iraq due to its desires to influence the Arab Gulf states, its support for Ba’athists in the Arab Gulf states, its anti-

²⁵³ “Operation Desert Storm: Evaluation of the Air Campaign,” (04/05/2019), http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/gao/nsiad97134/app_05.htm.

²⁵⁴ “Saudi Arabia - The Gulf War and Its Aftermath,” *Britannica Encyclopedia*, (03/24/2019), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Persian-Gulf-War-and-its-aftermath>.

²⁵⁵ Sharon Otterman, “SAUDI ARABIA: Withdrawal of U.S. Forces,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/saudi-arabia-withdrawl-us-forces>.

²⁵⁶ “Saudi Arabia - The Gulf War and Its Aftermath.”

²⁵⁷ “Gulf War Fast Facts.”

²⁵⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, “The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/future-us-saudi-relations>.

American posture and warm relations with the USSR. Notwithstanding, as the immediate threat from Iraq gradually recedes, Saudi's worries about Tehran's dominant ambitions in the Gulf have increased. In this context, Saudi Arabia developed a means to counterbalance its rival's aspirations by enhancing its influence in the smaller Arab Gulf states and playing adeptly between the two parties.

Given the hostility surrounding Saudi Arabia's external environment, it began to rally around itself the other Gulf countries concerned about the actions of both Iran and Iraq and seek external allies. The threat perception of Saudi Arabia and the US fear of losing its grip in the Gulf due to the collapse of its main pillar of the "twin pillar" policy, as a result of the revolution in Iran and Soviets invasion of Afghanistan, led to the formulation of the "Carter Doctrine." The doctrine stipulates, "*any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the USA... and will be repelled by any means necessary including military force.*"²⁵⁹ In this context, Saudi Arabia emerged as the main ally in the United States' security policy for the region and has its stability ensured by international forces, receiving aid, armaments, and military contingents from the US since 1980.

In 1945, President Roosevelt and Ibn Saud signed a treaty whereby the US will provide protection and technology in exchange for Saudi oil flow to the US and its allies.²⁶⁰ While the United States and Saudi Arabia have had different military relations in various forms since the 1940s, operational ties were established in the period of the Iran-Iraq War, which is the basis for the United States' closeness and Saudi Arabia.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the threat perceived from Iran forced Saudi Arabia to demand an extended deployment of a US warning and surveillance aircraft in Dharan to help the Saudi Arabian Air Force secure its oil facilities. The United States, having lost its Iranian pillar, moved towards a strategy of deterrence against Iran. Having lost Shah's Iran as a stable partner in the region, the United States found a new ally, Saudi Arabia. Cooperation quickly developed in all areas, including the military. This fact was a challenge to Iran and a demonstration of the strength and privileged position of Saudi

²⁵⁹ Farid Al-Salim, "Similarity of Doctrines: American Domestic Politics and the Carter Doctrine," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Villanova University, 2013, doi:10.33428/jsoutasiamideas.36.4.0068.

²⁶⁰ Hirst, *The Arabian Connection: The UK Arms Trade to Saudi Arabia*.

Arabia. As one of the key American allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia played an essential role in this strategy. A joint military committee that was established in 1982 only scaled through with Congress's unwillingness and Israeli dissatisfaction. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries continue to refuse to have United States bases on their territory.²⁶¹ The deployment of foreign forces has been difficult because of the scepticism of the US's help in the population's minds. However, the country's threat perception made it possible for the government to partner with the US. Since then, the US could use bases in the kingdom to conduct different Middle East operations. Thus, US forces in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Saudi Arabia requested "friendly forces" to defend and protect the kingdom. However, King Fahd noted that the forces would leave upon accomplishing their mission at the Saudi government's request.²⁶² Prince Sultan, the Saudi Minister of Defence, saw Iraq's action as "the most horrendous aggression known by the Arab nation against a sister Arab country."²⁶³ Prior to the invasion, Saudi Arabia blasted over \$100 billion on defence but only to invite foreigners because the Saudi army is still proving insufficient to meet the imminent Iraqi threat.

During the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia did not see Iraq as an immediate or potential threat to its security. Since the Gulf War, Iraq's military strength reduced as a result of the campaign by coalitions forces and sanction and as a consequence, its ability to project power reduced drastically. Therefore, while making choice during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia's concern was how to balance its relations with the US and the dissent emanating from its public against the war. While Saudi Arabia was openly opposed to the war, it allowed the US to use its base (Prince Sultan Airbase) to wage war against Saddam.²⁶⁴

American military bases in Saudi Arabia are the King Abdul Aziz airbase, Eskan Village Airforce base, Prince Sultan airbase, King Fahd Airbase and King Khalid airbase.²⁶⁵ The US military bases in Saudi Arabia served the purpose of balancing its

²⁶¹ *ibid.*

²⁶² Long, *Saddam's War of Words*. p.41.

²⁶³ *ibid.* p. 40.

²⁶⁴ Gregory F. Gause, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf," *Security Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2003), pp. 304–305, doi:10.1080/09636410490521271.

²⁶⁵ Wallin, "U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East," 2018.

rivals. It sent a message to both Iraq and Iran that it has a guarantor committed to protecting it. However, in April 2003, the United States ended its military presence in Saudi Arabia by moving the US Air Combat Operations Centre from Prince Sultan Air Force Base to Al-Udeid base in Qatar and reducing its forces from 4,500 to 400 soldiers for military training and cooperation missions. This came after Saudi Arabia refused to allow American aircraft to use its airports to launch airstrikes during the Iraq invasion, which angered US military leaders. The public in Saudi Arabia are vehemently condemning foreign troops' presence in the holy land. Nevertheless, diplomatic and military relations between the US and Saudi Arabia have continued since American troops withdrew from Saudi Arabia. US arms transfer to Saudi Arabia is not just about containing the Iranian threat but for the need to secure itself in an ostensibly perilous environment.²⁶⁶

II. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF SAUDI ARABIA SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

1. Saudi Arabia's Internal Vulnerabilities

a. Domestic Dissent Arising from Shiites

Given the exposure of the protest in its eastern region and its neighbouring allied Bahrain to foreign influence (especially from Iran), the Saudi regime treats the protests by Shiites as a threat to its security and stability. The regime believes the protests in Bahrain could snowball to engulf the region. The regime has long considered its Shiite population residing in its eastern region as a tool that Iran could use against it. The Saudi regime blames Iran for actively agitating Shiite with the destabilization of the Arab Gulf states as its main motive. Indeed, Iranian leaders have since called on the Shiites to unite against the regime in Saudi Arabia. Even recently, Khamenei noted, *“they [the al-Saud regime] will surely witness destruction, downfall, disaster and decline... This depends on the performance of believers and the believing community. If they act correctly, this will*

²⁶⁶ Ferhat Pirinççi, “ABD-Suudi Arabistan Silah Anlaşması,” *Akademik Orta Doğu*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2011), p. 65.

be done sooner, but if they do not act correctly, this will be done at a later time, but it will surely be done."²⁶⁷ The Shia population of Saudi Arabia is approximately 10% and primarily in its eastern region, where about 10% of the world's oil is extracted every day. In this province, following the rise of Khomeini in Iran, protests were seen especially in Qatif, where Shiite demonstrators carried Khomeini's postcards while denouncing the Saudi government openly. Since then, the regime in Saudi Arabia has been suspicious of the Shiites in its eastern province, and this fear only intensified following the Khobar bombing in 1996.²⁶⁸

Moreover, in 2009, Shia pilgrims from the east questioning the Saudi security forces in Medina eventually led to sporadic instances of violence in the Shia-dominated Eastern province, culminating in the arrest at the end of the month Taufiq al-Amir for requesting a constitutional monarchy. Nimr al-Nimr was among those who reacted to Medina's events by threatening a separate Shia state if the government proceeded to discriminate against the Shiites.²⁶⁹ As the talk spread across the media, the security agencies started to a manhunt. While the demand seems fairly mild, the Saudi regime takes it seriously, especially if it is articulation coming from the Shiite section of the society,²⁷⁰ due to the link the Shiites may have to an external enemy to the regime.

With the Arab Spring, the already existing crisis in its eastern region became endemic. Many young Shiites have become highly radical because they feel that equal rights can no longer be accomplished peacefully. This caused a generational dispute with the elderly Shiite population, who had a peace accord with the regime in the early 1990s but saw their influence fading to the radicalisation of the youth.²⁷¹ Following the killing of Shiites on 20 November in Awamiya, a series of protests that lasted over three months erupted. During the funeral of the young man killed by the security forces, the Eastern

²⁶⁷ Ali Khamenei, "Officials of the Country Should Be Outspoken When Expressing Islamic Principles: Ayatollah Khamenei," 05/27/2017, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/4884/Officials-of-the-Country-Should-Be-Outspoken-When-Expressing>.

²⁶⁸ Kevin Downs, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain," *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, vol. 8, no. 8 (2012), pp. 214–215, <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/students/student-journal/ug-winter-12/130213-win12-kevin-downs-6.pdf>.

²⁶⁹ Russell E. Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, ed. by Mehran Kamrava, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 313–40.

²⁷⁰ Guido Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," 2014, www.swp-berlin.org.

²⁷¹ *ibid.*

Province's largest protest ensued where protesters requested that the political prisoners be released, and segregation against the Shiites in Saudi Arabia stopped.²⁷²

During the Arab Uprisings, even moderate Shia groups demanded the end of the rule of the Saudi royal family. Many demonstrators believed that the regime is not willing to curb anti-Shiite abuse. As one of the key figures of political opposition since the Uprisings, Nimr widely derided the administration and called for political and religious changes. Also, he called on Shia citizens to rejoice in Crown Prince and Interior Minister, Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz's death in June 2012.²⁷³

It is noteworthy that the appeal for increased economic, social, and political participation of Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia's East is not related to groups' appeals in other areas, particularly in Riyadh. In March 2012, students from King Khalid University demonstrated the miseries of campus facilities, which led to the killing a student and hundreds of others injured.²⁷⁴ Even after these countermeasures, in July 2012, there was another round of protests. Two protesters were killed and nearly two dozen wounded by lethal force used by the security agencies. Thousands demonstrated in Qatif and Awamiya, shouting anti-regime slogans like "Down with Al Saud" and "Death to Al Saud".²⁷⁵ During the upheaval, a total of twelve young Saudi demonstrators died in the protest against the government.²⁷⁶

Given that the demonstrations were mostly held concurrently with those in Bahrain as the Saudi Shia felt unity towards their fellow Shiites in the neighbouring state, the regime in Saudi Arabia felt the uprisings resulted from the support they received from Tehran. As such, it sees the uprisings as Tehran's effort at destabilizing the Gulf monarchies. Indeed, there was a broad reference to Bahrain's events as the Shiites in Saudi Arabia called for the withdrawal of the Saudi army from Bahrain and the cessation of the Shiite persecution. Riyadh crushed harshly after requests for the overthrow of the powerful governor of the eastern province and even the Saudi regime.²⁷⁷

²⁷² BBC News, "'Protester' Shot Dead in Eastern Saudi Arabia," *BBC News*, 02/10/2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16987946>.

²⁷³ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," p. 318.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

²⁷⁵ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

²⁷⁶ Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011-2012," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 66, no. 4 (2012), pp. 628-59.

²⁷⁷ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

b. Dissent from Muslim Brotherhood and Political Islam

Another aspect of the regime's threat perception is the MB and its political Islam activism. The MB has been an influential Islamist organization with eighty years of age and a long tradition of support in the Gulf and beyond. The MB's expanded influence will contribute to Islam's politicisation, with volatile repercussions for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. The regime in Saudi Arabia pays great attention to the role the MB may play to this effect. As far back as 2002, the MB was blamed for "politicizing Islam for self-serving purposes" by the Saudi Minister of Interior, Nayef Bin Abdul-Aziz.²⁷⁸ In the sixties and seventies, the group and its allies became more closely active and deemed a serious challenge to the regimes since 2011.²⁷⁹ The Saudi regime is worried about an emerging Islamic structure that might threaten its Islamic credentials' validity. It is important to note that Saudi Arabia was founded by mobilization of the tribal military power of the Al-Saud clan and Wahhabism.²⁸⁰ This conservative Islamic doctrine (which Riyadh seeks to transform into an ideological influence in foreign policy) constitutes one of the bases of legitimacy and support of the regime and the symbolism of controlling the two most sacred cities for Islam (Mecca and Medina).²⁸¹ But this construction of religious power is only one of Al-Saud's strategies to remain in power and guarantee autonomy in its foreign policy.

The political activity of the MB set together an imperative of change through a democratic process. Despite decades of interaction with MB representatives, the regime was extremely dissatisfied with the MB rise to power via Egypt's elections. The regime, in particular, became at risk because the advancement of Wasatiyya-Islam by the MB could threaten the supposed religious authority of the al-Saud over the Sunni Muslim

²⁷⁸ Dania Koleilat Khatib, "Arab Gulf States' Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings," *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities*, ed. by Dania Koleilat Khatib, Marwa Maziad, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p. 30, doi:10.4324/9780429505300.

²⁷⁹ Telci, Rakipoğlu, "Suudi Arabistan'ın Müslüman Kardeşler Politikası: 1932-2016," pp. 137–68; Alexey Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry," *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015), pp. 19–20.

²⁸⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 122; ayyar Arı, *Geçmişten Günümüze Orta Doğu: Siyaset, Savaş ve Diplomasi*, 7th ed., Bursa: Dora Yayınları, 2017, p. 481.

²⁸¹ Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry," p. 20.

world.²⁸² Furthermore, a culturally oriented pluralistic republic's democratic approach questioned the Saudi idea of the hereditary monarchy institution.²⁸³

The MB philosophy is at odds with the Gulf monarchies and would likely weaken monarchical patriarchal structures. Indeed, Islamist factions that do not have any political participation have long been preferred by the Saudi regime. For this reason, the house of Saud finds the MB that adopted politics as an intellectual competitor and a paradigm that undermined its rule, given the significant internal dissent coming from Sunni Islamist groups such as al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Awakening).²⁸⁴ The Islamic Awakening is a hybrid of Wahabism and the Egyptian MBs component, just like the Umma Party. This was one reason why the Saudi government took an aggressive approach towards the MB since in the nineties.

Indeed, the MB's popular rise to power in Tunisia and Egypt gave Saudi Arabia and the bulk of the Gulf monarchies a disturbing warning. In the same vein, established democracy in Cairo would challenge Riyadh's stability and inspire change, if not revolt in a regime that is not adaptable to change. The risky pattern of the MB and Qataris encouraging political activism is aligned with the fact that violent Jihadis are ever more substituted by Islamic political activism in the region.²⁸⁵

When Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was overwhelmed by the Tunisian protest and a day before Hosni Mubarak was forced out of office, a group of activists took the opportunity on 10 February 2011 to declare the formation of the first Saudi political party, the Islamic Umma Party.²⁸⁶ The formation of the Umma Party was a threat since political parties in Riyadh were outlawed as non-Islamic. Renowned jurists, university professors, well-established people in business and political leaders were among the party's co-founders.²⁸⁷ The Umma Party combines Salafist thought with MB's democratic outlook.

²⁸² In Wasatiyyah Islam, moderate stance towards Islamic politics is being asserted. Moreover, emphasis is on the need to enforce shariah in an objective way in contrast to rulings.

²⁸³ Julius Diihstelloff, Alexander Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring,'" p. 37. *"The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East"*, ed. by Philipp O Amour, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

²⁸⁴ Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry," p. 20.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*

²⁸⁶ IHRC, "Saudi Arabia's Political Prisoners: Towards a Third Decade of Silence 1990, 2000, 2010," 2011.

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Its teachings are comparable to those in the other Gulf states that have fused elements of Wahhabism with MB's thoughts since the 1960s. Although this may seem very mild in principle, the Saudi regime and the rest of the Arab Gulf allies perceived it as threatening. Indeed, Abdul-Aziz al-Wahhabi (one of the founders of the Umma Party in Saudi Arabia) noted that *"You cannot just have the royal party governing the country. We want to raise this issue with government officials and persuade them."*²⁸⁸ Like the Kuwaiti Umma Party, which intends to end rule by nonviolent means in all Gulf States, bring an end to the division of society into smaller states, and compel the westerners to quit, the Saudi Ummah Party has a similar aim.²⁸⁹ The Umma Party is building on the philosophy of Dr. Hakim al-Mutairi, leader of the Kuwaiti Umma Party; calls for introducing political change in domestic and foreign politics. Although the demand made by the Umma party was moderate, the Saudi regime believes it was eventually attempting to undermine its government.²⁹⁰

c. Dissent Arising from the "Liberals"

Apart from the threat perceived from political Islam, Saudi Arabia also faces challenges from liberal reformers within its polity. Unlike political Islam activist, liberal reformers have been less frequently persecuted until Muhammad Said Tayyib, Hamid, Matruk al-Falih, and Ali al-Dumayni made their demands. Liberal reformers did not start with the Arab Spring as they have had a series of demands in the past. In 2003 for example, Tayyib and other signatories pressed for the creation of a constitutional monarchy in a petition known as "In defense of the Fatherland." Given that the liberals crossed the regimes redline, Tayyib and some of the signatories were briefly detained. During the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, Muhammad Tayyib and other Secular Sunni and Shiite filed an appeal against the imprisonment of liberal scholars to long jail terms and condemned the Shiite governments' repression demonstrating in the eastern province.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ Ulf Laessing, "Pro-Reform Saudi Activists Launch Political Party," *Reuters*, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-opposition-idUSTRE71942L20110210>.

²⁸⁹ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring"; Laessing, "Pro-Reform Saudi Activists Launch Political Party."

²⁹⁰ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring." p. 8

²⁹¹ *ibid.*

In 2012 and 2013, much was brought to the notice of Mahammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid. While Hamid has been a leading democrat in the country since the 1990s, the younger Qahtani has only been noticed by a wider public in recent years. Hamid and Qahtani were part of the initiators of the Saudi Civil & Political Rights Association. The latter's aims were primarily committed to releasing political prisoners and democratic reforms to allow for more political inclusion and the rule of law. Qahtani attracted attention to his exceptionally sharp criticism of the regime and its high profiled administrators. In the unfair treatment of many opposition figures, he described Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz as a wrongdoer and even advised the King to dismiss and charge him.²⁹² Even calls for reforms made by pro-regime journalists such as Jamal Khashoggi were perceived as a threat to the regime, making him the victim of the al-Saud's killing machine. Khashoggi was lynched by a Saudi hit squad believed to be authorized by the Crown Prince in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

d. Intra Regime Struggles

The issue of succession has been considered one of the Saudi regime's weaknesses since the beginning of the nineteenth century.²⁹³ According to its horizontal method of transfer of power, theoretically, male members of the ruling household could attain the position of a king leads to conflicts and crises, especially during the transition from one generation to another. Everyone aspiring for power tries to dominate and confine it to his offspring without considering the rest. The recurrence of these crises weakens the dominant group in power. Moreover, it facilitates foreign meddling, leading to the entity's ultimate collapse, as the second Saudi state demonstrates. Two princes (Turki bin Abdallah and Mishari bin Nasir) were assassinated, three (Faisal bin Turki, Khalid bin Saud and Abdallah Thunayan) were deposed, and several civil wars broke out, the last of which lasted a quarter of a century. In addition, foreign powers interfered several times, such as the Ottomans and the Rasheed family, in the kingdom's internal affairs.²⁹⁴

Although the royal family in Saudi Arabia has always tried to avoid matters reaching the point of an overt contestation over the throne, some expected the succession

²⁹² *ibid.*

²⁹³ Nabil Mouline, "Power and Generational Transition in Saudi Arabia," *Critique Internationale*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2010), pp. 125–46, https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CRII_046_0125--power-and-generational-transition.htm#.

²⁹⁴ Joseph A. Kechichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp 16-18.

issue to turn into a bitter, behind-the-scenes struggle generating instability, especially if senior princes move towards appointing their sons to positions that allow them to gain the necessary internal or external political influence to claim the right to the throne, at other princes' expense.²⁹⁵

After King Abdullah's death and the rise of Salman to the Saudi throne in late January 2015, potential problems and challenges for the new king were expected. There were challenges of political instability after King Abdullah's absence, with his dominant position and his previous balances and policies. Upon coming to power, King Salman relieved his half-brother Muqrin bin Abdul-Aziz and appointed his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef as Crown Prince and his son as the Crown Prince's successor. The move was met with strong opposition from the al-Saud family as it could increase instability in the country. This suggests that the struggle for power within the royal family has not been completely resolved despite the appointment of Prince Muhammad bin Nayef as heir and Prince Muhammad bin Salman as heir to the crown prince.²⁹⁶

The changes made by King Salman on April 29, 2015, which expelled both the former Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdul-Aziz and the veteran Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, confirm that the Saudi political system remains open to ambiguity until now. Perhaps this cabinet reshuffle came against the backdrop of the crises and disagreements Saudi Arabia faces on several fronts. The principal is the war in Yemen, a conflict that appears to be in trouble and complicated by tensions with Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional rival. Therefore, it appears that the main context for these changes is a struggle within the ranks of the Saudi royal family.

Perhaps one of the indicators of the emergence of the differences of the al-Saud family into the open and entering an unprecedented stage is the end of the old Saudi policy in the era before the Arab Uprisings, which was more balanced, in a relative sense, as it reflects the consensus within the royal family, and the conduct of consultations before making the decision. In June 2017, King Salman made some amendments giving him and

²⁹⁵ Madawi al-Rasheed, "In the Bitter Struggle for Saudi Rule, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Has Struck First," *The Guardian*, 2020.

²⁹⁶ Paul Aarts, Carolien Roelants, "The Perils of the Transfer of Power in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2016), pp. 596–606, doi:10.1080/17550912.2016.1238110.

Abdul-Aziz sons the power to name their sons as the crown princes. This paved way for his son's appointment, Muhammad bin Salman as the crown prince in 2017.²⁹⁷

After Muhammad bin Salman assumed the position of Crown Prince, the king and his sons became the most prominent decision making positions, with the remaining princes marginalized and some arrested, as evidenced in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel arrest in November 2017. Arresting rival, influential princes, wealthy individuals, former ministers and stripping them of some of their wealth represented a departure from the regime's traditional policies.²⁹⁸ Muhammad bin Salman's moves are threatening this unity and, most importantly, when the kingdom is facing a fiscal crisis resulting in the fall of oil price in the world market amid the war in Yemen. To what extent does Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman succeed in consolidating his power after the purge remains to be seen. In all cases, the great risk to which he is exposed is that, even if he obtains some short-term success, it will have been obtained at the price of opening the path for a terrible retaliation that may be on the way.

e. Fiscal Crisis

Saudi Arabia's heavy dependence on oil revenues has highlighted the role economic factor can play in the threat perception of the regime. The Saudi economy depends on oil revenue, which has since served as a great source of foreign exchange and used works to prevent revolts by citizens by buying loyalty and guaranteeing the regime's stability, making Saudi Arabia an excellent example of a rentier state. Moreover, while internally oil is responsible for financing the government support, it grants economic autonomy to Riyadh to act strongly in regional policy, from financing allies or insurgent groups fighting against regimes opponents.²⁹⁹ Besides, oil wealth made it possible for a political-military alliance with the US, seen as Riyadh's fundamental.

However, the global oil market fluctuates due to the constant change in oil prices in the energy markets. When oil prices fall, the country faces declining revenues, severe budget deficits and many other economic problems, which reduces the level of health

²⁹⁷ Abdullah F. Ansary, "An Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System," *GlobaLex*, 08/2020, https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Saudi_Arabia1.html#_edn26.

²⁹⁸ Martin Chulov, "How Saudi Elite Became Five-Star Prisoners at the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton," *The Guardian*, 11/06/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/06/how-saudi-elite-became-five-star-prisoners-at-the-riyadh-ritz-carlton>.

²⁹⁹ F. Gregory Iii Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2011.

services, public services and, consequently, public dissatisfaction. The persistence of low oil prices forces the regime to re-evaluate both energy subsidies, one of the foundations of the generous welfare state they offer, and the large investments they stimulate local economies. So far, its financial reserve has allowed the regime to maintain, with minor adjustments, its standard of living. Given that the regime relies on petrol for income, a fall in the price of crude from \$147 in 2008 to less than \$50 has a severe impact on the economy. This translated into a 15.84% budget deficit in 2015, 17.2% in 2016 and 10.56% in 2020³⁰⁰ with the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, one of the most important threats facing Riyadh is population growth and the unemployment crisis. World Bank figures show that Saudi Arabia's population growth rate in 2019 was 1.7%,³⁰¹ which may cause political and economic problems for the Saudi regime. Although the average unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia is 5.9 per cent, the Saudi labour market cannot attract its population. The service sector in Saudi Arabia has over-absorbed the workforce; the structure of production, industry and agriculture is not strong, and foreign labour has occupied a significant part of its market. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has a high unemployment rate among its people. Young people face an estimated 10 million foreign workers, occupying 75.6 per cent of the country's labour market.³⁰² Foreign labour in Saudi Arabia usually receives very high salaries from the government or private companies because of the Saudis' specialities. Besides, part of the foreign workforce in Saudi Arabia is engaged in work that the Saudis do not consider worthy.³⁰³

The issue of labour in Saudi Arabia is related to the Saudi education system. The Saudi educational and cultural system trains people who are rarely needed by the private sector. That is, most of them do not have the skills needed in modern economies. As a

³⁰⁰ H Plecher, "Saudi Arabia - Budget Balance in Relation to Gross Domestic Product from 2015 to 2025," *Statista*, 12/22/2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262532/budget-balance-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-in-saudi-arabia/>.

³⁰¹ The World Bank, "Population Growth (Annual %)," *The World Bank*, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW>.

³⁰² Gulf Business, "Expats Account for over 75% of the Jobs in Saudi's Labour Market," *Gulf Business*, 06/17/2019, <https://gulfbusiness.com/expats-account-75-jobs-saudis-labour-market-report/>.

³⁰³ Julia Glum, "Saudi Arabia's Youth Unemployment Problem Among King Salman's Many New Challenges After Abdullah's Death," *International Business Times*, 01/23/2015, <https://www.ibtimes.com/saudi-arabias-youth-unemployment-problem-among-king-salmans-many-new-challenges-after-1793346>.

result, most young people who want to enter the labour market cannot adapt to the private sector's discipline and prefers government jobs.³⁰⁴

2. External Threat Perceptions

a. Iran

Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as its main external threat for reasons such as its subversive activities in Arab states through the support of proxies within the Gulf and beyond, continued expansion of its influence throughout the Middle East, among other things. Moreover, there is a perception that Saudi Shiites serve the interests of the Iran for the fall of the al-Saud regime. This narrative correlation is accentuated in times of crisis and clashes between the group and the kingdom when loyalty to the Saudi regime and real legitimacy are put in check, as during the demonstrations in Qatif during the Arab Spring period.³⁰⁵

The ruling elite in Saudi Arabia believed in an existing “Shia Crescent” that envisaged a transnational Shiite alliance between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.³⁰⁶ This has since generated deleterious effects on actors in the region, as it led to an instigated idea of intense destabilizing action by Iran on Riyadh's internal affairs and the rest of the Arab Gulf monarchs.³⁰⁷ The Saudi regime's threat perception can be appreciated by acknowledging the connections between internal tensions, transnational loyalties, and state aspirations at the regional level.

Iran viewed the upheaval of the Arab Spring as ‘delayed extension’ of its Islamic revolution, that it hoped would result in an ‘Islamic awakening.’³⁰⁸ The model of blending Islam with democracy and promoting people's dominance was seen as a challenge to regimes that based their power on a combination of patronage and religion. In countries with a significant Shia community, this sense of danger appeared to be intensified. While

³⁰⁴ *ibid.*

³⁰⁵ Banafsheh Keynoush, “*Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes? Saudi Arabia and Iran*”, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016.

³⁰⁶ Haji-Yousefi, “Whose Agenda Is Served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent?” pp. 114–35.

³⁰⁷ *ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Riham Bahi, “Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement,”; Hakkı Uygur, “İran ve Arap Baharı,” *SETA Analiz*, vol. 52 (2012), pp. 1–28, <http://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/iran-ve-arap-bahari.pdf>; İsmail Akdoğan, “Arap Baharı'nın İran-Suudi Arabistan İlişkileri Üzerindeki Etkisi,” *Ortadoğu Yıllığı*, 2012; *International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2017), p. 94; Henner Fürtig, “Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion,” 2013, p. 5.

Iran made no clear references to the Gulf Shia community, the Shia were believed to be the intended audience for insurrection calls.³⁰⁹ This understanding will render Iran a popular example of the emergence of political Islam. It attempted to make a pluralistic identity that would attract focus from its unique (Persian, Shiite) heritage to be recognised as a regional leader that would preserve regional stability. In contrast to the pro-Western stance of the Arab Gulf regimes, Iran continuously emphasizes its strengths in opposing the US and Israel through its axis of resistance for example. Thus, Iran responses to the uprisings can be interpreted as selective steps to fulfil its hegemonic aspirations.³¹⁰

The exercise of power by Iranian proxies (Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraq's Shiite militias, and presumably Yemen's Houthis) intensified the suspicion of Saudi Arabia that Iran is encircling it with its proxies.³¹¹ As Henna Fürtig argued, Iran has played "a leading role in the creation of an 'axis of resistance', which includes Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Ramallah, and Gaza".³¹² In the midst of the turmoil that engulfed the region from late 2010, Iran joyfully greeted Mubarak's collapse and "supported" the Bahraini protests. Besides, with money and weaponry, Iran assisted the Syrian regime since Assad is its strategic partner. For Saudi Arabia, a strategic setback for Iran would have been the fall of Assad and the lost influence in the Levant and its links to Hezbollah as a consequence.³¹³

The conflict in Yemen further inflames the threat perception of Saudi Arabia because it felt it is being encircled by Iran's proxies. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia's direct military intervention in Yemen shows the seriousness of the threat perceived. Even though the version of Shia practised by Iran and Houthi are not the same, Iran's support made Saudi Arabia see them as an Iranian proxy. The Houthis gradually turned to Iran with a promise of assistance only after the war in Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Iran's link with the Houthi rebels suggests an attempt to take over Yemen through the

³⁰⁹ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 91.

³¹⁰ Henner Fürtig, "Iran: Winner or Loser of the 'Arab Spring'?" *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, ed. by Henner Fürtig, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 23–42.

³¹¹ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'" p. 40.

³¹² Fürtig, "Iran: Winner or Loser of the 'Arab Spring'?" p. 28.

³¹³ Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement," pp. 89–101.

insurgents. Houthis taking over Yemen will mean that pro-Iranian regimes will encircle Saudi Arabia to its north and south. Thus, increasing not just Iran's influence but posing a threat to al-Saud given that Iran can leverage its acquired position to meddle in the internal politics of Saudi Arabia, especially in the areas where Shiites are the majority.

It is noteworthy that the partnership between the Houthis and Iran was nothing but a loose sort of support. The Iran Houthi alliance is not close to the one between Iran and Hezbollah in terms of status and strength. The Houthi never received assistance similar to other Shi'a groups in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut.³¹⁴ Tehran only intensified its links after 2014, and as a consequence, Iran-made arms were used to assault Saudi Arabia.³¹⁵ This was evidenced since the rebel group started firing Iran-made ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia. The Houthi rebels fired more than 34 missiles to Saudi Arabia, targeting strategic spots like the King Khalid International Airport, the Saudi Palace, etc., in Riyadh.³¹⁶ Thanks to Saudi's Patriot PAC-2/PAC-3 for they have been deployed to intercept the missiles.³¹⁷ Although the Patriot air defence system intercepted missiles fired by the Houthi rebels, it can be argued that the threat to Riyadh is continuously growing.

The Houthis steadily depended on Tehran, which persisted as their only backer as the war advanced. This had become evident in an occurrence on 14 September 2019, when the Abqaiq and Khurai Saudi petroleum plants were targeted with drones and missiles, contributing to the decline of petroleum output by over a half in a day. While the Houthis claimed responsibility for the strike, Washington discovered that launched drones and cruise missiles were actually from Iran's soil.³¹⁸ This only revealed how the Houthi tended to mask Tehran's participation, how they had become Iran's surrogate and how subservient they can be to defend their ally.

The regime in Saudi Arabia perceives that a more and more militant Iran, with the help of its Shi'ite population in its eastern region, might once again attempt to destabilize

³¹⁴ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring'", Guido Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner," 2020.

³¹⁵ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

³¹⁶ IHS Markit, "Yemeni Rebels Enhance Ballistic Missile Campaign."

³¹⁷ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *Military Balance*, vol. 118, no. 1 (2018), p. 358, doi:10.1080/04597222.2018.1416983.

³¹⁸ Lolita C. Baldor, Robert Burns, "US to Send Troops to Saudi Arabia, Hold off on Striking Iran," *AP News*, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/4d4ce92397ba44a68bedd60edb2aee36>.

it. However, while Iranian security services have to be believed to be active and perhaps even conduct terrorist activities in eastern Saudi Arabia, the Iranian-backed insurgent movement is no longer active in the region.³¹⁹ Moreover, there is little Iranian impact on the Shia, and there is no indication that Iran could convince them to rise against the Saudi monarchs. Indeed, in the eastern region and Bahrain, Saudi persecution risks pushing the Shias into Iranian, Hezbollah or Iraqi Shia arms.³²⁰

Apart from the above, Iran has been providing different kinds of assistance in the form of training, armament and financial support to Shia militia groups in Iraq, which the Saudi regime is wary of. In June 2014, following the destruction of Shia shrines and progress made by ISIS, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani gave an Islamic legal opinion urging the Shiites to defend the Maliki led Government from the IS.³²¹ This was entailed by the fact that the Iraqi Security Forces were subjected to great defeat and was in no position to respond to the terrorist organisation. Consequently, many Shia militias working to defend the Assad regime had to return to Iraq to heed the call of the Grand Ayatollah, an invitation to join militias in protecting Maliki.

Moreover, the head of Iran's Quds Force, General Qassim Suleiman, was advising the Maliki-led government on Maliki's request. Few days after the legal opinion by al-Sistani, a committee of the Shiite militia forces, the PMF was established.³²² The militia group was supported by Iran through financing, advising etc. This is against the Saudi interest even though it sees ISIS is a threat to its stability. Iran welcomed an act to legitimise the incorporation of the PMF to the Iraqi Security Force in November 2016, because it sees the legislation as well deserved, and the effective performance of the militia group earned it legitimacy. Moreover, the PMF has a strategic potential for ensuring Iraq's security. However, Saudi Arabia sees PMF act as an agent that disrupts rather than stabilise Iraq. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia criticised the PMF on the ground that they were supported by Iran, thereby fuelling sectarian discrimination in Iraq.³²³

³¹⁹ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

³²⁰ *ibid.* p. 7.

³²¹ Renad Mansour, Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2017.

³²² *ibid.*

³²³ Hamdi Malik, "What Role Will Iran-Linked Militias Play Once IS Leaves Iraq?" *Al-Monitor*, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2017/03/pmu-iraq-shiite-militias-iran-syria-golan-israel.html>.

The rise of Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) to the top decision-making level of the monarchy meant the intensification of already troubled relations with Iran. The young prince integrated the “Iranian regime and its extremist Shiite ideology” into what he calls the “triangle of evil”, alongside the MB and terrorists, and qualified the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, as the ‘Hitler of the Middle East.’³²⁴ Mobilized by a need for domestic stability to undertake his developmental plans, MbS promoted an even more sectarian character than before the Iranian threat, invoking narratives and foundational myths related to immanent Persian expansionism and a Shiite conspiracy plan aimed at “world domination.”³²⁵

The regime’s fear increased when the nuclear agreement was reached. On the one hand, the P5 + 1 nuclear agreement³²⁶ strongly indicated to Saudi Arabia that the USA is not a credible ally in its struggle with Iran. Moreover, Iran’s pariah status waning made Saudi Arabia perceive the Iranian challenge growing considerably.³²⁷ On the other hand, Iran sees the P5 + 1 nuclear deal as a green light to launch its expansionist and sectarian project. Saudi Arabia was pessimistic regarding the JCPOA nuclear deal concluded between P5 + 1 and Iran. There is also doubt over Iran’s continuing unhindered strategic ambition with the absence of foreign sanctions. The Saudi stance, backed by its regional allies, was that the withdrawal of sanctions would provide Iran with substantial monetary and fiscal opportunities to implement its divisive regional policies.³²⁸ Although Iran’s nuclear program poses a serious challenge to the stability of Saudi Arabia, the regime perceives more threat from Iran’s political influence and possible leverage upon Shia minority communities in the Gulf States and its ideological clout in countries beyond the Gulf.

³²⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good,’” *The Atlantic*, (2018).

³²⁵ *ibid.*; Madawi al-Rasheed, “What Fuels the Saudi Rivalry with Iran?” *The New York Times*, 2018.

³²⁶ In 2015, the US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany agreed on a nuclear deal with Tehran. Iran agreed to dilute or, possibly, transport its enriched uranium abroad; stop fissile processing material in Fordow; make the Arak reactor not capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium, and permits international inspection of Natanz.

³²⁷ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, “Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the ‘Arab Spring.’” p. 42.

³²⁸ Akbarzadeh, “Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms,” pp. 99–100.

b. Qatar

Saudi Arabia perceives Qatar as a threat, perhaps of an existential magnitude. Since the 1990s, Saudi Arabia increasingly sees Qatar as a rival, especially as it has gained prominence in international negotiation and as the site of US CENTCOM after US military withdrawal from Saudi territory. As Ahmed Saif pointed out, Qatar is evolving to play a prominent role in the Gulf despite its tininess, although at Riyadh's expense. Thus, Doha's approach might be interpreted as an attempt to reduce Riyadh's perceived excessive influence.³²⁹

Qatar is perceived as a threat to the Saudi regime due to its independent and "uncontrolled" activist foreign policy, undermining Riyadh's influence vis-à-vis Iran in the region. Qatar's close links with Iran "[s]hould also be seen as an expression of Qatar's strong desire for a stable strategic environment and for a working relationship with Iran that ensures Qatar's continued freedom to exploit the two countries' shared gas field, the largest non-associated gas field in the world."³³⁰ Unlike other Arab Gulf monarch aligned to Riyadh via the GCC, Qatar did not always go along with the Saudi stance on regional issues.

Since the Arab Uprisings, Qatar held a stance of supporting revolutions that brought the MB to power in Egypt. Doha's economic and political assistance to Egypt and beyond at the time when MB came to power and Yusuf Qardawi's Tv programmes is some of the reasons why Saudi Arabia perceives the actions of Qatar as threatening. There is no doubt that Qatar-sponsored Al-Jazeera has given unquestionable media attention to the MB. However, it is noteworthy that the funding of MB by Doha was not related to the Arab Uprisings. Indeed, Qatar hosts Qardawi since the early 1960s and has aired his 'Sharia and life' programme on Al Jazeera from 1996 to 2011.

The transnational ideology of the MB is not confined to Egypt, as it still has the ability to expand regionally, much as Nasser's pan Arabism.³³¹ But why would Qatar support democratic movements when in its self it is a monarchy? Mehran Kamrava, succinctly gave an insight to the above question as, Qatar "...enjoys social cohesion and

³²⁹ Allen J. Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012. p. 104.

³³⁰ WiliLeaks, 2009 cited from, Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms," p. 93.

³³¹ Khatib, "Arab Gulf States' Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings," p. 30.

an absence of the sectarian tensions found in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, a unitary polity and small size unlike the UAE and Oman, and an apolitical population compared with Kuwait.”³³² Besides Qatar’s riches, the above meant that the country is shielded from the uprisings seen in other states in the middle east. Thus, its policy of supporting the uprisings.

The consequence of Qatar’s stance was a divide within the GCC whereby Qatar backed the MB and Mursi administration on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which heavily supported the 2013 coup d’état against Mursi on the other hand. In addition, it was reported that Qatar assisted the Mursi administration with more than \$5 billion in aid.³³³

Given that Saudi Arabia perceives a threat from political Islam, and as long as Saudi Arabia was concerned, Doha was interfering in its internal affairs since the MB has a transnational reach. Moreover, through the Al Jazeera tv channel, Qatar favoured anti-regime coverage regarding the Gulf states and the Arab world.³³⁴ Saudi Arabia sees Al-Jazeera as an ideological threat, as it does not accept opposition, much like many politicians in the Arab world, and regards its transmission as a threat to its regime’s stability.

Aljazeera, which is funded by the state, has been promoting the groups Saudi camp sees as terrorists, often defending democracy and dissent in a region ruled by secular autocrats or unpredictable kingdoms. The daily audience of Al Jazeera in the region was 34 per cent greater than any other pan-Arab channel put together, according to a survey.³³⁵ Aljazeera has all that it takes to promote certain narrative, which clashes with those of Gulf leaders and therefore poses an intolerable challenge to their legitimacy. So, it is not a surprise that one of the demands of the Arab Quartet was the closure of the Aljazeera channel during the recent diplomatic spat.

Saudi Arabia perceives Qatar’s actions of supporting terrorist groups and promoting the spread of extremist ideology, destabilising the region as a threat. Qatar was

³³² Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013.

³³³ Bassem Sabry, “As Qatar Supports Egypt, Many Egyptians Unexcited,” 2013.

³³⁴ Khlebnikov, “The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry,” p. 24.

³³⁵ *ibid.*

one of the most active supporters of Islamist fighters during the uprisings in Syria and Libya. While both Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported the Free Syrian Army, they supported different factions of the group. Certainly, the regime is afraid of the repercussions of supporting Islamists in Syria as there have been over a thousand Saudi militants that joined the Syrian war. It is feared that these insurgents will be well trained in war and ideologically ready to tackle the Saudi regime upon returning home.³³⁶ This led to negative reactions from Saudi Arabia and its allies within the GCC.³³⁷

Qatar's backing of MB in Egypt caused a split with Saudi Arabia that later backed the 2013 military coup against MB led government. Disputes between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, began to intensify in March 2014 when they recalled their envoys in condemnation of Qatar's proactive policies.³³⁸ Qatar's actions that Saudi Arabia and some GCC members saw as threatening culminated in a diplomatic crisis that called for naval, land and air blockade of Qatar in 2017. Before the current crisis, in March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors to Doha over its non-abidance of an agreement not to support *"anyone threatening the security and stability of the GCC whether as groups or individuals - via direct security work or through political influence, and not to support hostile media."* signed in November 2013 by the GCC states.³³⁹

Moreover, apart from the support Qatar gives the Muslim Brotherhood, it was also accused of supporting al-Qaeda, and ISIS.³⁴⁰ According to Hassan Hassan, the GCC states can be categorised into two camps: one seeks to advance its external interests through the support of Islamists, and the other, whose foreign policy is determined by opposing the rise of the Islamists. According to Hassan's scheme, Qatar falls into the first camp, while the Saudis and the Emirates are in the second.³⁴¹ However, it is worth noting that Qatar,

³³⁶ *ibid.*

³³⁷ Ermağan İsmail, Burak Gümüş, "Katar Dış Politikası ve Arab Baharı," *Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2014), p. 314

³³⁸ Khalid Islam Hassan, "GCC's 2014 Crisis: Causes, Issues and Solutions," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 2015, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2015/03/201533172623652531.html>.

³³⁹ "Saudi, UAE, Bahrain Withdraw Qatar Envoys" *Al Jazeera*, (01/31/2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/03/saudi-uae-bahrain-withdraw-qatar-envoys-20143591141945753.html>.

³⁴⁰ "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Cuts Off Diplomatic and Consular Relations With the State of Qatar | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," (01/27/2020), <https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/kingdom-saudi-arabia-cuts-diplomatic-and-consular-relations-state-qatar>.

³⁴¹ Hassan Hassan, "Qatar Won the Saudi Blockade," *Foreign Policy*, 2018, pp. 4–7.

in turn, sees the allegations as based on conjectures that lack credibility. Saudi Arabia also accuses Qatar of supporting

*“the activities of the Iranian-backed terrorist groups in the governorate of Qatif in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and... Bahrain, its continued financing, adopting and sheltering of extremists who seek to undermine the stability and unity at home and abroad, and using the media to fuel the internal strife.”*³⁴²

Another factor contributing to perceiving Qatar as a threat to Saudi Arabia is its stance, which is considered “less-confrontational” towards Iran. Indeed, the Emir of Qatar noted as far back as in 2009 that,

*“We are a small country and we can live with anything around us. We will not be an enemy to anybody, but of course we will not allow anybody to use us against others. We will not, for example, stand with America against Iran. For sure. Iran never bothered us, it never created a problem for us... It will be hard for the Gulf countries to be with Iran against the United States. And I believe Iran knows this.”*³⁴³

Qatar has played off challenging and rival forces to take full advantage of its interests and avoid reliance on any regional powers. Qatar’s mission has been to improve its security, stability and maintain independent foreign policy vis-à-vis the rival regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran.³⁴⁴ Therefore, gaining influence both regionally and internationally was a strategy that ensured Qatar had multiple allies with a vested interest in its survival as well as increasing the state’s global recognition as an emerging power. Qatar has ever since implemented seemingly conflicting strategies of economic cooperation with Iran while extending to Israel and housing the largest US military base in the Gulf.³⁴⁵ Moreover, Qatar concluded a security deal with Iran to tackle piracy in its common seas.³⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Qatar is developing extensive economic ties with Iran,

³⁴² “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Cuts Off Diplomatic and Consular Relations With the State of Qatar | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

³⁴³ Global Security, “Qatar and Iran,” (11/27/2020), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/qatar-forrel-iran.htm>.

³⁴⁴ Nuruzzaman Mohammed, “The Conversation Commentary: Saudi Rift with Qatar Exposes Growing Division in the Anti - Iran Alliance,” 2017.

³⁴⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications,” 2013.

³⁴⁶ Akbarzadeh, “Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms,” p. 98.

including in the joint development of the world's largest known natural gas field, the North Field or South Pars natural gas reservoir in the Gulf. As Wikileaks demonstrates, the closeness of Doha to Tehran must nevertheless be analysed by looking at, "Qatar's strong desire for a stable strategic environment and for a working relationship with Iran that ensures Qatar's continued freedom to exploit the two countries' shared gas field, the largest non-associated gas field in the world."³⁴⁷

As Syrian uprisings began, Qatar and Tehran found themselves on different pages, supporting government oppositions on the part of Doha while Iran supported the Assad regime. This was said to be a test of their close relationship. However, as Qatar's Minister of Foreign Affairs noted, "We do differ strongly from Iran over Syria...But Qatar does not consider Iran as an enemy."³⁴⁸ On the contrary, Tehran regards maintaining strong relations with Doha as a strategic resource to weaken Riyadh's domination of the GCC.³⁴⁹

During what is believed to be a cyberattack in May 2017, a statement appeared on the official website of Qatar, which attributed emir comments with sympathy to Iran and Hezbollah. According to the hacked website, Qatar emir reportedly said, "*Iran represents a regional and Islamic power that cannot be ignored and it is unwise to face up against it. It is a big power in the stabilization of the region.*"³⁵⁰ Although Qatar said the statement resulted from an attack by hackers, Saudi and UAE news networks continued to distribute it as a fact. Moreover, in the same vein, the emails of the UAE envoy to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba was hacked and subsequently published. The email indicated the UAE's long-standing desire to counter Qatari influences.³⁵¹ Indeed, Qatar paid millions of dollars as ransom to some Iraqi Shiite militias in order to free Qatari citizens, along with members of the royal family that were abducted in 2016 while hunting falcons in Iraq. However, Saudi Arabia sees it as deceitful backing of the Houthis whom Qatar and Saudi were fighting in Yemen fuelled Saudi Arabia's distrust of Qatar.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ Cable: 09DOHA442_a - WikiLeaks, as cited in Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," p. 93.

³⁴⁸ Ian Black, "Political Solution to Syrian War Does Not Interest Assad, Says Qatari Minister," *The Guardian*, 12/04/2013; Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," p. 97.

³⁴⁹ Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," pp. 89–106.

³⁵⁰ Jon Gambrell, "Hack, Fake Story Expose Real Tensions between Qatar, Gulf," *Associated Press*, 2017.

³⁵¹ "Hackers Leak Emails from UAE Ambassador to US – Middle East Monitor," (01/28/2020).

³⁵² Hassan, "Qatar Won the Saudi Blockade," pp. 4–7.

Qatar's warm relations with Turkey is another factor that added insult to injuries in its relations with Saudi Arabia. Doha has good commercial and military relations with Ankara. But having just these should not be felt as threatening. The question now is, why would such threaten the Saudi regime? One of the answers lies in Turkey and Qatar's good relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. The two countries are supporters of Mursi's government, and Ankara took a tough stance towards the coup that led to the overthrow of Mursi.

Moreover, since it is believed that the Turkish government is promoting a neo-Ottoman agenda of having influence in the Muslim world it had ruled until the 20th century, Saudi Arabia should be threatened by this. Turkey has established a military base in Qatar and has its biggest base located in Somalia and signed a military deal with the government of Sudan and agreed on leasing the Suakin island located on the Red Sea. Suakin island was the main port of Sudan when it was under the Ottoman rule but was allowed to rot after the construction of Port Sudan, located 56 km away.³⁵³ The Saudis see it as a step towards the actualization of a Turkish expansionist dream. According to Mohammed Abu Talib, *"Turkey is blatantly seeking expansion in the region and using its influence, especially against Egypt and Gulf countries. The most dangerous aspect of this visit was handing over to Erdogan Suakin Island, which faces Jeddah and which he sees as the symbol of the Ottoman Empire."*³⁵⁴ It was Qatar that financed the wide media coverage to the \$650 million deal as part of 13 agreements between Sudan and Turkey in the Arab world.³⁵⁵

Saudi Arabia's threat perception stems from the fact that Iran could use a Turkish base on the Red Sea to support the Houthi rebels in Yemen. This fear was echoed by a commentary in the Gulf New as follows,

"Iran can use the new Turkish base in Sudan to ship more weapons to Houthis. Turkey, by using the new military facility, could send more soldiers to Qatar or intervene more in Egypt by manipulating the Muslim Brotherhood [...] With

³⁵³ Yeni Şafak, "Turkey to Restore Sudanese Red Sea Port and Build Naval Dock," *Yeni Şafak*, (09/29/2020), <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/economy/turkey-to-restore-sudanese-red-sea-port-and-build-naval-dock-2911420>.

³⁵⁴ Fehim Tastekin, "Erdogan's Ottoman Dream Causes Storm in Red Sea," *Al-Monitor*, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/turkey-sudan-cooperation-sparks-worry-in-gulf.html>.

³⁵⁵ *ibid.*

Turkish and Sudanese provocations, Sudanese aspirations for Halayeb can be reignited.”³⁵⁶

Saudi Arabia sees this action as encirclement by a rival that has a rival model of governance, which many Arabs prefer not just in Saudi Arabia but across the Middle East.

c. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The Saudi regime also faces ideological threats from non-state violent actors such as ISIS. The transformation of ISIS from a potential threat to an imminent threat to Saudi Arabia came with the group’s geographical expansion in the immediate and close proximity of the Gulf states. After its control of the city of Ramadi in Anbar Province of Iraq, ISIS became a clear threat to the security of Riyadh. The phenomenon of ISIS led to the collapse of the Iraqi army and the rise of popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and increased the penetration of Iran in Iraq. American officials have expressed their support for the participation of Tehran through the PMF to deal with ISIS as long as it is done under the supervision of the central government of Baghdad. This means an American acknowledgement of the importance of the Iranian role and its need to restore the territories lost to ISIS.³⁵⁷

ISIS threat extends beyond the purely military nature to include a threat to the state’s identity. The Islamic State is based on an ideology that relies on playing with the tendency of division and spreading sectarian strife. There is no doubt that this ideology, if successful, threatens to split the nation and harm social cohesion and then threaten the identity of the countries in which the Shiites are one of the spectra of the social fabric of the society. Abubakar al-Baghdadi indirectly declared that he was the legal custodial guardian of Makkah and Madinah’s two most important Muslims mosques by his title as a caliph. He followed up immediately with a demand for the abolition of the Saudi regime and the kingdom's dissolution by the declaration of a new caliphate.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ *ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Dina Esfandiary, Ariane Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS Policy,” *International Affairs*, 2015.

³⁵⁸ Zehra Nur Düz, “Dilemma of Daesh: Caliphate Claim Persists after Baghdadi’s Death,” *Anadolu Agency*, (01/06/2021).

Al-Baghdadi's call came with the expansion of ISIS' war against Shiism in the Gulf, making the threat perception of ISIS in Riyadh increasing.³⁵⁹ Moreover, ISIS fighters, who killed two Saudi security agents and their leader at the Saudi frontier with Iraq, rendered a very obvious threat.³⁶⁰ But the internal danger presented to Riyadh by the terrorist organization in terms of security of the government was much more dangerous. ISIS carried out several suicide bombings beginning in November 2014 in the Eastern provinces where the bulk of Saudi Shiites stay. In order to bring its presence within the Kingdom, ISIS has sought to take advantage of anti-Shiite feelings in Saudi society.³⁶¹ From a broader strategic perspective, the threat of ISIS to the security and stability of the Gulf states in particular increases, given the intersection of the organization's sectarian ideology and practical evidence on the ground confirms that there are plans to break up the region on sectarian and ethnic foundations.

B. BALANCING STRATEGIES

1. Internal Balancing Strategies

a. *Clampdown, Palliatives and Reforms*

Since the turmoil of the Arab Spring, sectarianism turn into a practice of distinguishing identity and sustaining the Saudi regime, drawing on the discursive legacy of the Iranian revolutionary era and serving as an answer to the Iranian call that popular uprisings were 'delayed extension'³⁶² of the 1979 Islamic revolution, which would result in the 'Islamic awakening.'³⁶³ The Policy of Riyadh since the Arab Uprisings can be viewed in terms of interrelationship between internal and external threat perception. Within the internal realm, the regime disregarded requests from dissenting Shiite to stop prejudice led to the regime clampdown on the Shiites. In reality, the government's often

³⁵⁹ Bruce Riedel, "Why Saudi Arabia Is Vulnerable to Islamic State," *Al-Monitor*, 05/29/2015; Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'"

³⁶⁰ Angus McDowall, "Three Saudi Guards Killed in Suicide, Gun Attack on Iraq Border: Ministry," *Reuters*, 01/05/2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-saudi-idUSKBN0KE0G420150105>.

³⁶¹ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'"

³⁶² Riham Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement," *International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2017), p. 94, doi:10.1080/03932729.2017.1306395.

³⁶³ Henner Fürtig, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion," 2013, p. 5. www.giga-hamburg.de.

brutal tactics could lead young demonstrators to seek help from Tehran, while Iran will be ever ready to step in to assist its brethren.

The regime reacted with incarceration, strengthened security services and warning its citizens to refrain from demonstrations at the onset of the turmoil.³⁶⁴ The regime aimed to discourage economic and political demands and was isolating protesters by rendering these demonstrations sectarian to condemn them and make sure that they did not extend to other parts of the state. Indeed, the regime inflated sectarian divisions within as an approach to avert the advent of national non-sectarian forums. As Madawi Al-Rasheed noted,

*“[i]n response to the Arab Spring, sectarianism became a Saudi pre-emptive counter-revolutionary strategy that exaggerates religious difference and hatred and prevents the development of national non-sectarian politics. Through religious discourse and practices, sectarianism in the Saudi context involves not only politicising religious differences, but also creating a rift between the majority Sunnis and the Shia minority.”*³⁶⁵

The perception of threat from Iran was suppressed via the Saudi regime's ideational strengthening, which was carried out by the exaltation of sectarianism, thereby serving the ontology of the threat of “self-other”. Ultimately, this strategy has an internal impact on the regime’s relations with its own national “other”, the Shiites of the Eastern Province.

On March 5, the Saudi government banned demonstrations across the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Because of the ban, the kingdom remained relatively peaceful, except in its eastern region where Shiites protested. Before the demonstrations in the area, leading members of the Shia community were released from prison. The release of these prisoners did not reduce the demonstration. Arrests were made before the deployment of live ammunition on demonstrator to stop the demonstrations. Although there have been a series of protests in the eastern part of the kingdom, it is noteworthy that they are not

³⁶⁴ Steinberg, “Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring.” p. 6.

³⁶⁵ Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2011), p. 513, doi:10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01129.x.

linked to the Arab Uprising. The Protests is part of a long campaign to promote autonomy and accountability in the Kingdom.³⁶⁶

The government has been utilising force to suppress political demonstrations in its eastern region since the early days of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Behind Iran's claim to support the oppressed in the Muslim world, Shiite in the Eastern part of Saudi Arabia has been protesting due to frustration emanating from the lack of political and religious space and discrimination. At that time, the demonstration was violent leading to vandalization and even the razing down of an English bank and the confrontation with Saudi forces.³⁶⁷

Moreover, the regime clamped down on dissents arising from liberals and Islamists such as those affiliated with the MB. Increased state violence confronted Islamists who asked less provocatively. Islamists such as Salman al-Awda that has advocated for political Islam since the 1990s and has been supportive of the protests was barred from his TV shows by the regime and 2012 and issued a travel ban on him. Salman Awda is believed to have played a leading role in "al-Sahwa al-Islamiya" (the Islamic Awakening), which is a hybrid of Wahabism and the Egyptian MB's component just like the Umma Party.³⁶⁸

In 2013, the Saudi regime reiterated its response to the MB to serve as a warning to the Islamic Awakening. However, no further meaningful steps were taken due to a change in the threat perception of the regime, which came as a result of the coup against MB in Cairo, the Iran nuclear deal and new leadership following the death of King Abdullah in January 2015. Additionally, the incremental reconciliation to the MB, King Salman also moved his evaluation of foreign policy objectives and policies into an unrestricted focus of countering Iran's threat.³⁶⁹ Overthrowing the MB government in Cairo (which meant that the transnational nature of the threat had been relegated), and

³⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 541.

³⁶⁷ *ibid.* p. 541.

³⁶⁸ Guido Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," 2014, p. 8-9, www.swp-berlin.org.

³⁶⁹ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'" p. 31.

Tehran's growing influence in the Gulf and beyond are among the other factors that led Saudi Arabia to re-evaluate its threat perception.³⁷⁰

Moreover, the government pressured Muhammad Said Tayyib, who is among the liberals calling for reforms soon after the petition was released, to pull out his signature and apologize on the state television. He was barred from going overseas for a few months. This response demonstrated how volatile it could be in the Shiite Street demonstrations that could not disregard Tayyib and his allies' demands for the right to freedom of expression and the rights of assembly and association. The government's actions show how it wants to block a coalition between Sunni liberals and Shiites. The petitioner's direct complaint that the regime was fomenting confessional discord by continuously stressing Iran's alleged impact over Shia activists would have been an unacceptable threat. Saudi Arabia accuses Iran and the Shiites of the region of rising religious fragmentation.³⁷¹

Since calls for reforms made by even pro-regime personalities are treated as a threat to the regime, the regime took measures to silence such kind of dissents. This only culminated in the maiming and excruciatingly killing of journalists such as Jamal Khashoggi by a Saudi hit squad believed to be authorized by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul.

To deal with the crisis that often emanates within the royal family, King Abdullah ordered the formation of the Allegiance council consisting of sons and grandsons of al-Saud. The task of the allegiance council was to elect the Crown Prince when a new king comes to power and also to avoid constitutional vacuum or political chaos.³⁷² In addition to this king, Abdullah created the office of the deputy crown prince, an heir to the crown prince who could become the king in the event both the position of the king and crown prince becomes vacant in March 2014. The creation of the office of the deputy crown prince has meant that the deputy prime minister that could automatically become the crown prince in case of vacancy becomes discretionary. The allegiance council has been

³⁷⁰ *ibid.*

³⁷¹ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

³⁷² Fahd Shaheed, "Governance and Politics of Saudi Arabia," *Chronicle Fanack*, (12/26/2020), <https://fanack.com/saudi-arabia/governance-and-politics-of-ksa/>; Ansary, "An Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System ."

vested with the authority to decide who becomes the crown prince.³⁷³ In the same month, King Abdullah appointed his brother, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul-Aziz, as heir to the Crown Prince. Some considered the action as a desire by the king to limit the influence of his crown prince, Prince Salman, who had hoped that his son Prince Muhammed bin Salman would assume the position of Deputy Minister of Defence's position to control the decision-making in the Kingdom's military/defence affairs.³⁷⁴

Moreover, to prevent these social ills from sparking social upheaval, King Abdullah announced a notable expansion in public housing spending (\$ 10.7 billion) and the social security budget (\$260 million). Moreover, a \$37 billion welfare package and an additional \$94 billion were announced in the years to come.³⁷⁵ As part of the welfare package, a significant amount was to be used in building 5000 housing units for the Saudis, raising the minimum salary, and generating about 60,000 new jobs in the interior ministry.³⁷⁶ The rest will be used in hiking the wages of workers and welfare services in the form of discount in education. Moreover, at a time, state employees received a bonus equivalent to two months' salary. The governments' reform package helped in defeating the problems that provoked an uprising.³⁷⁷ In addition, it allowed Saudi women to participate in municipal elections and promised to reduce their employment restrictions. However, the envisaged measures are short-term, given the situation did not change. Through resolving some of the kingdom's fiscal woes that spark unrest, along with its restricted political changes, the regime has partially overturned protesters' appeals. Demonstrations are demonized, and peaceful protesters are detained daily and often branded as saboteurs motivated by international rule.³⁷⁸

The Saudi economy has been facing serious difficulties as a result of the decline of crude oil prices in the world market. The consolidating trend outlined in the budget of 2016 amounted to 326 billion riyals (\$87 billion) to boost the next year's budget.³⁷⁹ The need to dispel the myth of the sanctity of oil, which has been holding back the

³⁷³ Ansary, "An Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System."

³⁷⁴ Gerald Butt, "Saudi Arabia: Why Succession Could Become a Princely Tussle," *BBC News*, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29792691>.

³⁷⁵ Ulf Laessing, "Saudi King Back Home, Orders \$37 Billion in Handouts," *Reuters*, 2011.

³⁷⁶ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," p. 318.

³⁷⁷ Mabon, "Kingdom in Crisis? The Arab Spring and Instability in Saudi Arabia," p. 540.

³⁷⁸ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," p. 319.

³⁷⁹ "Saudi Arabia Cuts 2016 Budget Deficit, to Boost 2017 Spending," *Reuters*, 12/22/2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-economy-budget-idUSD5N17S01X>.

economy, led to the unveiling of vision 2030. This came at a time when the new Saudi King Salman assumed the throne following the death of King Abdullah. Moreover, it was a much-needed development given the economic realities of the country. The fall in the price of crude oil, with the expensive adventure by leading the war in Yemen, meant that the regime could no longer repeat the experiment of 2011 when the late King generously allocated \$37 billion as palliatives to the poor and unemployed.³⁸⁰

While Saudi Arabia remains the third in the world ranking of military spending, only 2% of these costs are implemented in the country. The vision 2030 envisaged the creation of military industries that should meet 50% of the needs of the Armed Forces. The vision aimed to achieve this through direct government investment and strategic cooperation with the world's largest companies through the transfer of technology and personnel training.³⁸¹

The vision 2030 also envisaged privatization of government properties and the introduction of Value Added Tax to complement the fall in oil prices.³⁸² This led to the Initial Public Offering (IPO) listing of Saudi Aramco in 2019.³⁸³ Moreover, for the Saudi regime to survive the post-oil era, it initiated the building of the NEOM project, which is part of its vision 2030. The multi-billion-dollar futuristic megacity project is expected to create more jobs and diversify the Saudi oil economy.

b. Armament (Military Expenditure and Arms Transfers)

In Saudi Arabia, the armed forces and national defence systems are at the heart of the monarchy's concerns, structured with strong external support. As a central purpose, it is precisely the consolidation of a capacity for deterrence by the country, forming an immense conventional arsenal to contain Iran's strategic ambitions in the region. While the Saudi regime resorted to locally produced arms for its armament, its production capacity only covers around 2% of its spending in the area on domestically produced

³⁸⁰ Laessing, "Saudi King Back Home, Orders \$37 Billion in Handouts."

³⁸¹ "National Industrial Development & Logistics Program," p. 190-7, (03/07/2021), https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/attachments/NIDLP_Delivery_Plan_-_English_Jan_2019.pdf.

³⁸² Simeon Kerr, Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia and UAE Introduce 5% VAT in Bid to Narrow Deficits," *Financial Times*, 01/02/2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/b1742920-efd0-11e7-b220-857e26d1aca4>.

³⁸³ Natasha Turak, "Saudi Aramco IPO: Shares Surge as Trading Begins," *CNBC*, 12/11/2019.

equipment and equipment. Saudi Arabia aimed to reduce its dependence on foreign arms procurement by 50% in the year 2030.³⁸⁴

Since 2011, Saudi Arabia's defence budget and security expenditure rose from \$54.3 billion to \$88.5 billion in 2015 (see table 5 below). With the decline in the price of crude oil in the world market, since the peak in 2015, Saudi Arabia's military spending declined and reached its lowest in 2020 (See table 4 below). However, due to the security environment brought about by the Arab Spring, the kingdom increased its defence expenditure to \$53 billion in 2011.³⁸⁵ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) report, Saudi Arabia ranks as the third-largest defence investor in the world, having spent approximately US \$61.9 billion in 2018.³⁸⁶

<i>Table 5: Saudi Arabia's Military Spending from 2011-2020</i>										
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
MILEX	54,297	61,449	70,406	82,987	88,520	63,337	70,621	72,918	61,952	57,519
% Change	1.4	13.2	14.6	17.9	6.7	-28.4	11.5	3.3	-15	-7.2
Data Source: SIPRI MILEX										

Between 2010 to the present, arms transferred to Saudi Arabia increased to 369% compared to the previous decade, according to SIPRI data. Saudi Arabia, by far, has the largest defence budget in the region. According to SIPRI TIV, from 2010 to 2018, Saudi Arabia is the second-largest receiver of arms globally (See **table 6**). From 2010 to 2015, its military expenditure rose from \$45.24 billion to \$90.3 billion, representing a 99% increase if expressed in percentage. Although its spending dropped by 29% in 2016, it rose by 9.2% in 2017 to \$ 69.4 billion.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ "National Industrial Development & Logistics Program," p. 190-7, (03/07/2021), https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/attachments/NIDLP_Delivery_Plan_-_English_Jan_2019.pdf.

³⁸⁵ Jarzabek, "GCC Military Spending in Era of Low Oil Prices," p. 11.

³⁸⁶ Nan Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, 04/2020, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/fs_2020_04_milex_0.pdf.

³⁸⁷ *ibid.* p.8.

The United States is the primary source of arms obtained by Riyadh between 2010 and 2018, followed by the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Canada (see **table 8 below**).

Table 6: List of Top Arms Recipients: 2010-2020

1	India	30,152
2	Saudi Arabia	21,822
3	China	11,287
4	Australia	10,966
5	UAE	10,626
6	Egypt	9,701
7	Algeria	9,530
8	Pakistan	9,387
9	South Korea	8,610
10	Iraq	7,186

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database

In December 2011, in a \$33.4 billion deal, the US agreed to sell 84 F-15SA aircraft, together with supporting equipment and munitions. The package also includes the modernisation of its existing 70 F-15S to F-15SA. The package also provides for the supply of 175 attack and transport helicopters³⁸⁸ and 2,592 AGM-114R Hellfire missiles.³⁸⁹ The deal allows Saudi Arabia to replace its weapons expended in Yemen and enhances its capability.³⁹⁰ Delivery of the weapons has taken place since 2016, and it is expected to conclude in 2019. The deal has a lifetime value of about \$60bn.³⁹¹ The US admitted that the deal is meant to show Iran “that its nuclear program is not getting them leverage over their neighbours, that they are not getting an advantage.”³⁹²

Table 7: Arms transferred from to Saudi Arabia since 2011

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Arms transferred (\$)	1,222	1,033	1,614	2,740	3,377	2,961	3,931	3,315	3,419	2,466

Source: SIPRI TIV

In a deal of \$1.7 billion, the US agreed to upgrade Saudi's Patriot air-defence systems to the advanced PAC-3. Saudi's Air defence included 16 batteries PAC-2 Patriots

³⁸⁸ Thom Shanker, David E. Sanger, “Obama Is Said to Be Preparing to Seek Approval on Saudi Arms Sale,” *The New York Times*, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/18/world/18arms.html>.

³⁸⁹ “Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa,” 2012, p. 302.

³⁹⁰ “Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa,” 2012, p. 302.

³⁹¹ *ibid.*

³⁹² Shanker, Sanger, “Obama Is Said to Be Preparing to Seek Approval on Saudi Arms Sale.”

of 96 missiles, MIM-23B I-Hawk which 16 batteries and 128 missiles and some provided by France.³⁹³ With the deals above, Saudi's capability to counter the Iranian missile threat was improved. In 2013, a \$6.8 billion deal for the supply of SLAM-ER JSOW, Harpoon Block II 1000 GBU-39 munitions.³⁹⁴ On the other hand, the UK, between 2012 and 2015, as part of the Al-salaam deal, transferred 350 Storm Shadow missiles and 44 Hawk-100.³⁹⁵

Despite criticisms against Saudi Arabia for its carefree attitude towards violation of human right, the US and its western allies did not stop selling weapons to Saudi Arabia. There is a noticeable increase in Saudis arms transfer from \$2,740 to \$3,377 m since the start of its campaign against the Houthis in 2015 (see **table 7 above**). The United States is supporting the Saudi Arabian military operation in Yemen by agreeing to assist the Saudi-led coalition with logistics and intelligence, which did not provide for the direct involvement of the US military in the course of operation. President Obama supported the intervention in Yemen without formal congressional approval and agreed to sell weapons and military equipment to the Saudis. The move was dictated by a desire to mitigate the discontent of the Saudis with the nuclear deal with Iran, which they perceived as a betrayal. Washington has sought to convince the GCC states that this deal mainly intended to deprive Tehran of the potential of nuclear arms at a Camp David conference in May 2015. The United States sponsored the Syrian resistance and held close relationships with the countries of the GCC. It has also improved its security relation with Riyadh owing to the kingdoms' restricted military capability. In 2015, Washington approved Patriot missiles and additional components to be sold to Saudi Arabia in a \$5.4 billion deal.

In sum, the Obama government has approved weapons sales to Saudi Arabia for \$60 billion since 2010.³⁹⁶ The US is also supporting the coalition by providing intelligence and whatnot. Moreover, the US Navy supported the naval blockade of Yemen. However,

³⁹³ "Raytheon Gets \$1.7 Billion Patriot Deal," *Defense News*, (03/19/2019), <https://www.upi.com/Raytheon-gets-17-billion-Patriot-deal/74681309198406/>.

³⁹⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, Michael Peacock, "Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Now Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance," 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150428_Gulfarmssales.pdf.

³⁹⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018."

³⁹⁶ Bahi, "Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement," pp. 89–101.

Saudi's operation in Yemen prompted the United States to stop selling some kinds of weapons, including precision-guided munitions by the United States of America.³⁹⁷

In 2015, the Obama administration agreed to sell 5000 JDAM, 1000 GBU-10 Laser-guided bombs, and some Smart and general-purpose bombs to the tune of \$1.29 billion.³⁹⁸ This will help Saudi Arabia to refill the weapons it used in Yemen and Syria against Islamic State. In addition, some of the GBUs sold to Saudi Arabia were used in the attack on a school bus filled with children.³⁹⁹ The sales mirror Obama's assurance to shore up his commitment to Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states in the GCC after the Nuclear deal with Iran.⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, in the same year, with \$11.25 billion and \$5.4 billion deals, the US agreed to sell four littoral combat ships and patriot PAC-3 air defence missiles, respectively.

Since 2016, with the announcement of a reduction of 30% of its military spending, Saudi Arabia has been reducing its spending gradually since then. For example, according to the IISS Military balance, Saudi Arabia allotted \$81.9 billion, \$81.5 billion and \$76.7 billion for 2015, 2016, and 2017 defence budget, respectively.⁴⁰¹

Table 8: Top Arms Suppliers to Saudi Arabia 2010-2018

1	USA	13,226
2	UK	4,659
3	France	985
4	Spain	685
5	Germany	540
6	Switzerland	350
7	Canada	291
8	Turkey	281
9	Italy	227
10	China	125

³⁹⁷ Joe Gould, "US to Halt Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia Over Yemen Casualties," *Pentagon*, 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2016/12/14/us-to-halt-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-over-yemen-casualties/>.

³⁹⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018."

³⁹⁹ Fayeze Nureldine, "Yemen: Three Years on, US and UK Arms Supplies to Saudi Arabia-Led Coalition Are Devastating Civilian Lives," *Amnesty International*, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/yemen-three-years-on-us-and-uk-arms-supplies-to-saudi-arabia-led-coalition-are-devastating-civilian-lives/>.

⁴⁰⁰ The White House, "U.S.- Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement," (02/14/2019), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-Gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.

⁴⁰¹ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *Military Balance*, vol. 118, no. 1 (2018), p. 319, doi:10.1080/04597222.2018.1416983.

Source: SIPRI TIV

With \$ 63.7 billion allotted for its military expenditure in 2016, Saudi Arabia accounted for the largest military expenditure in the Middle East. On the world stage, it is the fourth largest military spender that year. Saudi Arabia has increased its military spending annually since 2002; its arms expenditure of 2016 was 30% lower than that of the year 2015.⁴⁰² During the same year, Riyadh imported \$ 4 billion worth of weapons, according to SIPRI. In 2017, with \$ 89.1 billion as the defence budget, it still maintained the lead in defence spending in the Middle East. But it gained a place up to be the third in the world compared to 2016 in which it was the fourth.⁴⁰³ The United States, the United Kingdom, France and China sold 90% of the military equipment imported by Saudi Arabia between 2015 and 2017. Saudi Arabia is ranked at the top of the world's list of arms importers, followed by the UAE in the Middle East (see **table 6 above**) as it partners Saudi coalition against Houthis in Yemen.

In May 2017, during the visit of the American President Donald Trump to Riyadh, the parties signed an agreement on the transfer of weapons worth \$ 110 billion. The deal is seen as the most significant shift in US-Saudi relations since the new US president came to power. Under President Obama, tumultuous relations between the two countries culminated in US public criticism of civilian casualties due to the military campaign against Houthis. Thus, the withdrawal of many US military advisers from within the Kingdom. The deal includes the sales of M1A2S Abrams battle tanks (\$1.15 billion), multi-mission surface combatant ships (\$11.25 billion) and CH-47F Chinook helicopters (\$3.5 billion) approved by the Obama administration.

Moreover, in the deal, the United States will supply the Kingdom with 7 THAAD missile defence system with a worth of \$15 billion and 150 Blackhawk combat helicopters. Also, the package is the upgrade of the Saudis existing Patriot air-defence system at \$6 billion and supply of some air to surface missiles and four fidgets at the cost of \$4.46 billion and \$6.65 billion, respectively.⁴⁰⁴ The air defence weapon system in Saudi Arabia is designed for non-nuclear deterrence. Ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, fighter

⁴⁰² Nan Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2017," 2018, p.7
https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/sipri_fs_1805_milex_2017.pdf.

⁴⁰³ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," p. 320.

jets, artillery and rocket launchers provide defensive substitutes to nuclear weapons and help Saudi Arabia move towards a sustained regional arms race.⁴⁰⁵

France's arms sales to Saudi Arabia are a result of the mutual concern over Iranian influence in the region. Since 2010, France transferred \$985 million. Weapons such as Surface to Air missiles, anti-tank missiles, VL-MICA SAM system, BONUS-2 guided shell etc., were transferred to Saudi Arabia from France.⁴⁰⁶

The reluctance of the United States to sell some types of weapons to Riyadh due to reasons that may not be detached from internal and external pressure made Saudi Arabia think of China as an alternative. As stated above, it is the US's reluctance and opposition from Israel. Thus, China serves as a selective gap filler of armament to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.⁴⁰⁷ Riyadh also confirmed the transfer of DF 21 ballistic missiles from China in 2014. Moreover, since 2014, Saudi Arabia ordered four 35 wing Loong-1 and -2 Unmanned Aerial Vehicle/Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle⁴⁰⁸ when Obama failed to sell drones to the kingdom, citing violation in the Yemeni operation.

Saudi Arabia pledged to purchase \$10 billion in weapons from Russia in 2015. However, it was only able to achieve up to \$1bn.⁴⁰⁹ Saudi Arabia and Russia are still talking about acquiring the most advanced missile defence system. In October 2017, the Kingdom and Moscow sealed a \$3 billion deal for the possible procurement of S-400 air-defence systems.⁴¹⁰

2. External Balancing Strategies

a. Alliance commitment: Saudi Arabia, Peninsular Shield Force and the Bahraini Uprisings

Bearing in mind the threat of the spread of Arab revolts to their area of influence,

⁴⁰⁵ Obaid, "A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine: Mapping the Expanded Force Structure the Kingdom Needs to Lead the Arab World, Stabilize the Region, and Meet Its Global Responsibilities."

⁴⁰⁶ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018."

⁴⁰⁷ Lily Hindy, "A Rising China Eyes the Middle East," 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/rising-china-eyes-middle-east/?session=1>.

⁴⁰⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018."

⁴⁰⁹ Oliver Carroll, "Russia and Saudi Arabia 'sign \$3bn Arms Deal' as King Salman Visit Shows How Much Relations Have Changed," *The Independent*, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-king-salman-visit-saudi-arabia-moscow-vladimir-putin-a7985161.html>.

⁴¹⁰ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," p. 320.

Saudi Arabia began the process of balancing such threats, adopting a posture more active to combat dissent in Bahrain, the most fragile in the Gulf. The Saudi regime is endangered by the instability in Bahrain and its Eastern Province. What enflamed this fear is the perceived presence of a “Shia crescent” that runs from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq.⁴¹¹ As such, the regime has been occupied with the security of its government and the rising influence of Iran. Indeed, the Bahraini uprising constituted both internal and external threat to the Saudi regime. In the internal realm, the real threat of the Bahrain regime’s downfall aroused in Riyadh the fear that the Shiite revolt in this country would lead to a spill over of protests in Shi’ite areas of his kingdom.⁴¹² There was also the Saudi fear that the fall of a Sunni monarchical regime would lead to greater internal dissatisfaction. With the potential overthrow of an Arab monarchy, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood, the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy itself could have been increasingly contested.⁴¹³

In an interconnected way to internal security, Riyadh found that its external security would also be threatened with the possible loss of influence in Bahrain for rival Iran, in the event of the fall of the aforementioned Sunni regime and its subsequent replacement by a pro-Iranian Shiite. This hypothetical growth of Iran is also understood as an internal threat to Riyadh since the Saudi elite read the protests in Bahrain and the one in its territories as the outcome of orchestration by Iran in order to destabilize its regime.⁴¹⁴

Given the fall of its close allies as a consequence of the Arab Uprisings, while the US watches, Saudi Arabia intervened directly via the Peninsular Shield Force (PSF) of the GCC to suppress the uprising in Bahrain. The PSF intended to deter the Shia majority in Bahrain from overthrowing the government and also to give a direct signal to Iran that Bahrain fell under the Saudi Arabia sphere of control.⁴¹⁵ Saudi Arabia sent 1200 of its

⁴¹¹ James Devine, “Iran Versus ISIL,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2015), p. 30, <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/249/iran-versus-isil>.

⁴¹² Rene Reiger, “In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring,” Cambridge, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20120>.

⁴¹³ *ibid.* p. 6.

⁴¹⁴ Steinberg, “Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring.”

⁴¹⁵ Yoel Guzansky, “Strategic Hedging by Non-Great Powers in the Gulf,” *Great Powers and Geopolitics International Affairs in a Rebalancing World*, New York: Springer, 2015, p. 242, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-16289-8_4.

soldiers to protect the regime from falling⁴¹⁶ because if the protests succeeded, it would have been costly for Saudi Arabia and its stake in preserving the status quo. Uncontrolled protests in Bahrain would have weakened it and reinvigorate the Shiites.⁴¹⁷ Iran harshly opposed and rejected the GCC actions in Bahrain.⁴¹⁸

Bahrain has always been important to Riyadh because of its understanding of its position as a major counter to Tehran. Due to its shared border with Bahrain and the existence of a majority Shia population, the success of the revolt would pose an immediate threat to the ruling regime in Riyadh. As Jason Rivera noted, "*the proximity of the Shia population in both nations creates a situation where political rupture in Bahrain could very easily spillover to Saudi Arabia.*"⁴¹⁹ The security of the House of Saud relies on preserving the status quo. The demise of Al Khalifa will lead to the emergence a government aligned to Iran or even a government not aligned to Saudi Arabia. This is will be devastating for the security and supremacy of Riyadh among the GCC countries and it would lose trust in the rising Iranian influence among allies.⁴²⁰ Thus, the allegation of meddling by Iran during the chaos in 2011, leading to strong coordination under the GCC and Saudi intervention, to the end of the protests in Bahrain.

Furthermore, the intervention and its success also mean greater control and Saudi influence over strategic Bahrain. Due to the propping of the Bahraini regime via aid and assisting to suppress protests, it is argued that Manama is now a de facto protectorate of Saudi Arabia.⁴²¹ Accordingly, by combining financial aid with military intervention, the Saudi regime thwarted instability in Bahrain that impacted its internal security, and the possibility of an external threat posed an immediate neighbour that would be aligned to Iran.

b. Saudi Arabia in the Libyan Scene

Riyadh saw the Libyan Arab Spring as an opportunity to overthrow an old enemy

⁴¹⁶ Ethan Bronner, Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Put Down Unrest," *The New York Times*, (03/14/2011).

⁴¹⁷ Downs, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain," p. 229.

⁴¹⁸ Hakan Kılıç, "İran-Suudi Arabistan İlişkileri ve Arap Baharı," *Ahi Evran Akademi*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2020), p. 114

⁴¹⁹ Jason Rivera, "Iran's Involvement in Bahrain," *Small Wars Journal*, 2015.

⁴²⁰ Kevin Downs, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain," *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, vol. 8, no. 8 (2012), p. 211.

⁴²¹ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring." p. 19.

and as a means to build a positive image of defenders of the Libyan people, to increase its internal legitimacy. Indeed, Muammar Gaddafi has historically been antagonistic to the House of Al-Saud, seeking to embarrass and put into check their legitimacy. Qaddafi had attempted repeatedly, for decades, to undermine the Al-Saud monarchy and to challenge its authority. Furthermore, in 2003, Gaddafi has attempted to murder crown Prince Abdullah which fatally tainted the Libyan-Saudi ties.⁴²²

Initially, Riyadh used multilateralism for this objective, requesting on March 8 2011, to the Council Security Council (UNSC) intervention in Libya to protect civilians in that country.⁴²³ A few days later, the Arab League asked the UNSC to impose a no-fly zone under Libya, with the same purpose.⁴²⁴ This regional pressure and the interest of European powers culminated in the UNSC Resolution 1973, which established a zone of exclusion and authorized the use of all means necessary to protect civilians. With this legal apparatus, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened in Libya, contributing decisively to the fall of Gaddafi at the end of October 2011; indicating that Riyadh's political and diplomatic effort for the fall of the former Libyan dictator had been successful.⁴²⁵

In addition to politically supporting NATO's intervention in Libya, Saudi Arabia has supported armed groups in Libya fighting against Islamist factions inspired or affiliated with the MB supported by Qatar.⁴²⁶ As Rieger Rene asserted, *"By supporting the rebellion through arms supplies and enabling the NATO Operation 'Unified Protector,' which gave the rebels much needed military support, Riyadh contributed to the fall of the Gaddafi regime."*⁴²⁷ In addition to the traditional Saudi perception, the MB's regional strengthening poses a threat to its internal stability. Riyadh's interest in reducing Qatar's growing regional influence is evidenced in the Libyan proxy struggle between the two nations. Despite having Salafism as a political-religious base similar to Saudi Arabia,

⁴²² Rene Reiger, "In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," Cambridge, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20120>.

⁴²³ Duraid Al Baik, Salama Samir, "GCC Calls for UN Action on Libya," *Gulf News*, 2011, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/gcc-calls-for-un-action-on-libya-1.773101>.

⁴²⁴ David Batty, Jack Shenker, "Syria Suspended from Arab League," *The Guardian*, 2011.

⁴²⁵ Benedetta Berti, Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2014), pp. 25–34, doi:10.1080/23739770.2014.11446600.

⁴²⁶ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudis Expand Regional Power as Others Falter," *The New York Times*, 2015.

⁴²⁷ Reiger, "In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

Doha has built a close relationship with the group Islamist for decades.⁴²⁸ This approach is purely pragmatic since it aims mainly to counterbalance Riyadh's influence on Salafist groups. Certainly, Qatar offers the MB significant financial and political support mutually, while the MB directs its energies as a channel to project Qatar's regional influence.⁴²⁹ While Qatar's policies do not constitute a primary threat to Saudi Arabia, due to the undeniable superiority of Riyadh, it has yet delayed Saudi Arabia's efforts to effectively balancing its rivals.

c. *Saudi Arabia's War against the Houthi's in Yemen*

The Yemeni Civil War has its roots in the Arab Spring. The popular uprisings forced president Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign and hand over the post to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. However, the political transition opened space for instability that is very difficult to control, with insurgencies, wars, and guerrilla movements. The importance of Yemen is determined by the fact that it shares a long border with Saudi Arabia (Asir, Najran and Jizan). While at the official level, the territorial disputes between Saudi Arabia and Yemen were settled in 2000, the agreements are not recognized by the Houthis.⁴³⁰ The situation in Yemen is critical to the national security of Saudi Arabia. By the end of 2014, the Houthi rebel group supported by Iran took control of Yemen's capital, forcing Hadi into exile.⁴³¹

The consequence was the war by Saudi Arabia aligned with other Arab countries to fight the rebels to restore democracy and the elected government in Yemen. Although this is not the first time Riyadh is intervening in Yemen, it is the first time it organized and coordinated a ground offensive. Until present, Riyadh never used its military forces for offensive purposes, even during the 1960s Yemeni civil war and the incidents on the Yemeni frontier in the 1970s.⁴³² The intensity of the military alliance's responses has

⁴²⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar and The Arab Spring Policy Drivers and Regional Implications," 2013.

⁴²⁹ Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar in a Time of Revolution," 2013, www.csis.org/mideast.

⁴³⁰ Marcus Montgomery, "A Timeline of the Yemen Crisis, from the 1990s to the Present," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 12/07/2017.

⁴³¹ BBC News, "Yemen Crisis: Why Is There a War?" *BBC News*, 06/2020.

⁴³² Gregory F. Gause, *Saudi-Yemen Relations: Domestic Structures and Foreign Influences*, Columbia University Press, 1990; Anna Sunik, "Regional Leadership in Authoritarian Contexts – Saudi Arabia's New Military Interventionism as Part of Its Leadership Bid in the Middle East," *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2018), pp. 65–85.

prompted Iran to increase its support for Houthis, exposing Yemen to conflict outside national control under the direction of external powers in their respective proxies. The Houthis had long-standing relations with IRGC and Hezbollah, which supported the Houthis with their ballistic missiles. It is reported that each year, Tehran offers 10 million to 20 million USD in assistance to Houthi rebels.⁴³³

Moreover, the Houthis concluded a direct commercial flight deal with Iran, and Tehran decided to construct a power station in Yemen.⁴³⁴ Consequently, their involvement with Iran made it possible for the Houthis to gradually use armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or missiles as early as 2018. This has also suggested more supplies of Iran-made weapons in both volume and quality to the Houthis. In June 2019, when the Houthis targeted Abha airport with cruise missiles, it was obvious how menacing these latest armed systems were.⁴³⁵ Moreover, in September 2019, the Abqaiq and Khurai Saudi petroleum platforms were targeted with UAVs and missiles contributing to the decline of more than half of petroleum output in a day. While the Houthis claimed responsibility for the strike, Washington discovered that launched drones and cruise missiles were actually from Iran's soil.⁴³⁶

Against this backdrop, Yemen constituted an arena in which Saudi Arabia engaged to counter Iranian influence. According to Khalid Almezaini, “[t]he Yemen issue is very central for the Saudis. They fear that if there is a government in line with Iranian foreign policy there, it may give a strong voice for the Shiites inside Saudi Arabia.”⁴³⁷ The operation in Yemen marked the emergence of new security discourse in the Gulf. It was the first time that the member countries of the GCC employed their military forces in such an engaging manner. This engagement by Arab countries was the result of an interest in combating both a state actor that could threaten the regional order, Iran, and a non-state actor upward and hostile, the Houthis.⁴³⁸

⁴³³ Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018.

⁴³⁴ *ibid.*

⁴³⁵ Maher Chmaytelli, Sylvia Westall, “Yemen’s Houthis Strike Saudi Airport, Coalition Vows to Retaliate,” *Reuters*, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-airport-idUSKCN1TD0WS>.

⁴³⁶ Baldor, Burns, “US to Send Troops to Saudi Arabia, Hold off on Striking Iran.”

⁴³⁷ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Saudis Warm to Muslim Brotherhood, Seeking Sunni Unity on Yemen,” 2015, pp. 26–29.

⁴³⁸ Emile Hokayem, David B. Roberts, “The War in Yemen,” *Survival*, vol. 58, no. 6 (2016), pp. 157–86, doi:10.1080/00396338.2016.1257202.

It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia came into conflict with the Houthis between 2009 and 2010, after the failure of the state-run charge against the group. In a border control war in which the group accused the Saudis of supporting Yemeni troops from the Saleh government to attack them.⁴³⁹ Over one hundred Saudi soldiers died, mainly during ground fighting,⁴⁴⁰ establishing two major concerns for the Saudi regime. The first was regarding the Saudi army, which, despite its technological superiority and allied with the Yemeni government, suffered several casualties from the Houthi rebels, demonstrating that its operational efficiency remained precarious.⁴⁴¹ The second is regarding the possibility of the rise of a Shiite faction linked to Iran in a nation with 1,307 kilometres of border with Saudi Arabia, which could control the Bab al-Mandeb strait, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.⁴⁴²

Since the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, the Saudi regime's security concerns in Yemen include maintaining allied government away from Iranian influence, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Zaydi Shia Houthis that both gained control of parts of the Yemeni territory. At the start of the popular uprisings in Yemen, Riyadh, at the same time, supported then-President Ali Saleh, sought to ensure an influence on the opposition.⁴⁴³ With Saleh's resignation and election in February 2012 from Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi as the new president, Saudi Arabia maintained its policy of generous financial donations in order to guarantee its political influence, pledging \$ 3.25 billion to assist the new government of Yemen to combat al-Qaeda.⁴⁴⁴ The amount is justified by the threat the extremist group presents for the stability of the Saudi regime and the fact that it is located so close to Yemen. Saudi Arabia has already suffered several attacks on terrorists executed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and their regime is considered

⁴³⁹ Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge," *Yemen: On the Brink*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010.

⁴⁴⁰ Katherine Zimmerman, "Tracker: Saudi Arabia's Military Operations Along Yemeni Border," *Critical Threats*, 2009, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁴¹ Hokayem, Roberts, "The War in Yemen," pp. 157–86.

⁴⁴² Cordesman. Anthony H., "America, Saudi Arabia, and the Strategic Importance of Yemen," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/america-saudi-arabia-and-strategic-importance-yemen>.

⁴⁴³ Crystal A. Ennis, Bessma Momani, "Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 6 (2013), pp. 1127–44, doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.802503.

⁴⁴⁴ Mohammed Mukhashaf, Angus McDowall, "WRAPUP 1-Yemen Government Troops Advance; Donors Pledge \$4bln Aid," *Chicago Tribune*, 2012, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2012-05-23-sns-rt-yemen-wrapup-1-pix-tvl5e8gnd0j-20120523-story.html>.

a major enemy of the terrorist network. Prince Turki Al Faisal succinctly captured the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Yemen as,

*“an increasingly unstable Yemen represents a very real security threat due to the potential for terror cells to take root there. This rough, rugged southwest corner of the Arabian peninsula, with a population of over 20 million, has been an arena for Al Qaeda operations since Al Qaeda established training camps there in the 1990’s, and according to our intelligence sources, Al Qaeda’s influence is strong in the country.”*⁴⁴⁵

Instability generated by the Arab Spring in Yemen only increased the group’s activities in the country, which started to control part of the Yemeni territory.⁴⁴⁶ Alongside Al-Qaeda, the Houthis also contributed to the fragmentation of Yemen and are strongly accused of receiving Iranian support.⁴⁴⁷ Yemen controlled by Houthi, represents an interrelation of internal and external threats to the Saudi regime. Domestically, Riyadh fears that the Shi’ite political Islamism of the Houthis will arrive at its territory and challenge the legitimacy of its regime; externally, there is a fear that Iran will be strengthened by gaining yet another ally to pose a threat to Saudi Arabia.

Faced with these threats, Riyadh has acted in two ways. Initially, the Saudi regime, after the takeover of the capital, by the Houthis, suspended the aid it has provided to the Yemeni government for decades to weaken the Yemeni government’s operability, as the country is dependent on external Saudi support to function.⁴⁴⁸ Saudi diplomacy has used massive aid for decades to guarantee its influence over Yemen.⁴⁴⁹ In this sense, by cutting this aid, Saudi Arabia aims to weaken the Yemeni government’s operability. Equally,

⁴⁴⁵ Turki Al Faisal, “Saudi Arabia’s New Foreign Policy Doctrine in the Aftermath of the Arab Awakening,” *Belfer Center for Science & International Affairs*, 2013, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/PrinceTHKSPublicLecture.pdf>.

⁴⁴⁶ Aaron Ng, “In Focus: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemen Uprisings,” vol. 3, no. 6 (2011), pp. 1–4, doi:10.2307/26350984.

⁴⁴⁷ Eric Schmitt, Robert F. Worth, “Aiding Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role,” *The New York Times*, 2012.

⁴⁴⁸ Ahmed Al Omran, Maria Abi-Habib, “Saudi Arabia Suspends Aid to Yemen After Houthi Rebels Take Over - WSJ,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-suspends-aid-to-yemen-after-houthi-rebels-take-over-1417704587>.

⁴⁴⁹ Ginny Hill, Gerd Nonneman, “Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy,” *Chatham House*, 2011.

Saudi Arabia has been strengthening relations with Yemeni tribal leaders to turn against the Houthis.

There is a change in Saudi strategy in dealing with the Houthis since the ascendance of King Salman. Indeed, there is a noticeable change in the threat perception of the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia. While before Salman, the priority was to deal with MB, since 2015, events such as the crushing defeat of the MB, the nuclear deal which emboldened Iran and its growing influence brought about a shift in the threat perception of the regime in Riyadh. The regime now perceives its greatest threat from Iran. As a result, a change in its strategies in fighting the Houthis has been recorded. Given that Saudi Arabia has no allies on the ground to fight the Houthis and sees the MB as a lesser evil than Iran or ISIS, it employed MB allied or linked groups such as Islah Party in Yemen to fight the Houthis.⁴⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that the Saudi regime had been the supporter of al-Islah against the Yemeni government long before the Arab Uprisings and the rise of MB to fame in Egypt.⁴⁵¹ This shift in policy became vivid when Saud Al-Faisal, then the Saudi foreign affairs minister, averred that Saudi Arabia “*don’t have any problem with the Muslim Brotherhood*” it is only against a “*small segment affiliated with the group.*”⁴⁵² Moreover, Abdul Majeed al-Zindani of the Yemeni Islah Party together with the heads of Tunisian Ennahda and Islamic Action Front Party of Jordan, became the guests of King Salman soon after ascending to the throne as the king.⁴⁵³

In the light of the rising discontent of its main ally with Washington’s Middle East strategy and the nuclear deal with Teheran, the Saudi alliance has earned American assistance. While Obama’s presidency condemned its behaviour, it agreed to assist its allies by letting them tackle the advancement of Iran into the region. The US military communicated intelligence, refuelled Saudi fighter jets and provided bombs and replacement parts to this effect.⁴⁵⁴ Riyadh might not be able to fight the war without the assistance of the US. In the first days of the conflict, prompted by abuses and the desperate

⁴⁵⁰ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, “Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the ‘Arab Spring.’” p. 44.

⁴⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁵² Saud Al-Faisal, cited in *ibid.* p. 43.

⁴⁵³ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ Emile Hokayem, David B. Roberts, “The War in Yemen,” *Survival*, vol. 58, no. 6 (2016), pp. 165–66, doi:10.1080/00396338.2016.1257202.

humanitarian crisis created by airstrikes, the opposition was stronger in the United States Congress. Although the Obama administration reacted in December 2016 by halting selling guided explosives gears to Riyadh, there is little shift in practice concerning support.⁴⁵⁵

While the alliance managed to reach the city's suburbs, the international community's reaction to the intervention strengthened over the coming months. The danger that the assault could worsen the already appalling humanitarian condition in Yemen appeared staggering. Moreover, the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi was another explanation why the world was getting deeply worried about the war at the moment. Specifically, the US Congress chose to increase pressure on the coalition after unfreezing arms sales by Trump and his lackadaisical attitude towards the Khashoggi assassination.⁴⁵⁶

d. Saudi Isolation of Qatar

As stated earlier, the disputes between Riyadh and Doha are well-founded. The thorniest issue for the Saudi regime is Doha's relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia's great rival. Given Qatar's policy of supporting revolutionaries against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Uprisings, Saudi Arabia and its allies withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in 2014 while citing "meddling in their internal affairs" as the reason.⁴⁵⁷ In 2014, Saudi Arabia and the UAE even briefly withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in a clear warning to Qatar's "dissident". As Saudi Arabia felt threatened by the rise of the MB and the support it received from Doha, its threat perception intensified. Saudi regime's protest should be expected because it considers Qatar a small state that must work on its terms.

After the coup in Egypt, the Iran nuclear deal, and the change of leadership in Riyadh amid the growing influence of Tehran, the perception of MB's threat by the regime has been downgraded. In contrast, the Iranian threat has become the most prominent for

⁴⁵⁵ Helene Cooper, "U.S. Blocks Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Concerns Over Yemen War," *The New York Times*, (10/24/2020); Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁴⁵⁶ Grace Segers, "In a Rebuke to Trump, Senate Votes to End American Aid to Saudi War in Yemen," *CBS News*, 2019; Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁴⁵⁷ Ian Black, "Arab States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar in Protest at 'interference'," *The Guardian*, 03/05/2014; Ermağan İsmail, Burak Gümüş, "Katar Dış Politikası ve Arab Baharı," *Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2014), p. 314

leaders in Riyadh. Given that Doha enjoys good relations with Tehran, Riyadh sees it as an obstacle to its effort to balance Iran. As a result, a diplomatic crisis culminated into a Riyadh-led blockade on Doha in 2017 for having good relations with Tehran. Of the 13 demands made by the quartet a few days from the embargo's enforcement, the first is about demanding Doha limit its ties with Tehran.⁴⁵⁸

e. Saudi Arabia's Meddling in Egypt and Sudan

When the Egyptians started their protests on January 25, 2011, the Saudi elite interpreted this phenomenon as a possible cause of two threats to Saudi security. Internally, the transnational Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt could become an internal challenge to the Riyadh regime. Externally there was the fear that its main Arab ally would move to the sphere of Iran's influence. The victories of parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia (November 2011) and Egypt (June 2012) contributed to this fear of the al-Saud regime. This was because Islamists linked to or influenced by the MB constitute an important opposition organization in Arabia Saudi since the early 1990s.

Given that Hosni Mubarak's departure is against Saudi Arabia's interest in stability and regime survival, it was fast in establishing good diplomatic relations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that immediately filled the vacuum left. During the SCAF's regime that was headed by Field marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi Saudi Arabia committed to aiding the new regime with 4 billion dollars, of which \$2 billion was provided.⁴⁵⁹ Given that MB is viewed as ideological opposition to the Saudi regime, the assistance given to Egypt's government can be read as an effort by Saudi Arabia to minimize MB's popularity and stifle access to a leadership role in Egypt. As Rieger noted,

“[i]t can...be assumed that by bolstering the Egyptian economy, the Saudi regime attempted to reduce the Muslim Brotherhood's growing appeal to the Egyptian population: In the post-Mubarak era, the Muslim Brotherhood managed to

⁴⁵⁸ Riad Domazeti, “Suudi Arabistan Raporu: Muhammed Bin Selman'ın İktidar Yürüyüşü ve Reform Süreci,” *İnsamer*, 2021.

⁴⁵⁹ Mohsin Khan, Richard LeBaron, “What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?” *Atlantic Council*, 2013.

enhance its approval rates among the economically unfortunate inter alia by providing food and social services free of charge.”⁴⁶⁰

In addition to internal threat perceptions, Saudi Arabia fears a possibility that the MB government in Egypt could tilt towards Iran and “[a] *rapprochement between revolutionary Iran and post-Mubarak Egypt presented the risk of dramatic change in the regional dynamics against Saudi strategic interests.*”⁴⁶¹ Indeed, the decision by then-President Muhammad Mursi to visit Iran in August 2012 and Ahmadinejad's trip to Egypt in February 2013 reinforced Saudi suspicions. Given the perception of external and internal threats, the Saudi Arabian government has not hesitated to support the July 2013 military coup that ousted the MB.⁴⁶² Of the \$12 billion aid announced by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE to the new regime in Egypt right after the coup, Riyadh provided \$5 billion.⁴⁶³ Providing aid to the military government in Egypt served Saudi Arabia's interest in maintaining its regime survival, given that the MB has been perceived as having an internal security dimension to the survival of the regime. To support the anti-Muslim Brotherhood policy adopted by the new Cairo regime, which in December 2013 started to consider the group as a terrorist organization, Riyadh, in March 2014, also did so.

Sudan served as the cornerstone of reversing Tehran's power. Since the Arab popular uprisings, Riyadh's concern was centred on Sudan. In 2013, with a shared naval drill in Port of Sudan and selling Sudanese arms to pro-Saudi Syrian rebels, the first signs of rapprochement with the regime emerged. Therefore, in 2014, Khartoum implemented a critical cooling stance towards Iran. The Saudis most notable success in disrupting Sudan's relations with Iran was by the shutdown of Tehran's cultural centre in 2014 and expelling Iranian officials from Khartoum accused of spreading Shia Islam through them.⁴⁶⁴ Later, Sudan cut its diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016 due to the razing of Saudi Arabia's Embassy and the Consulate Building in Mashhad by mobs. Riyadh paid \$1

⁴⁶⁰ Reiger, “In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring.”

⁴⁶¹ Soubrier, “Regional Disorder and New Geo-Economic Order: Saudi Security Strategies in a Reshaped Middle East.”

⁴⁶² Reiger, “In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring.”

⁴⁶³ Khan, LeBaron, “What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?”

⁴⁶⁴ Feierstein, “The Impact of Middle East Regional Competition on Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa.”

billion to Khartoum's Central Bank, possibly as a reward for cutting ties with Tehran.⁴⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that right before the ties' breakdown, Khartoum agreed to openly endorse Saudi-driven Yemen involvement by deploying soldiers and jet fighters.⁴⁶⁶

During the Arab Uprisings in Sudan, which began in 2018, Saudi Arabia, with its key regional ally, the UAE, used the developments to further their interests, injecting \$3 billion to attract Transitional Military Council (TMC) leaders. Meddling by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi led demonstrators in Khartoum to chant, "We do not want Saudi aid even if we have to eat beans and falafel!"⁴⁶⁷ Remarkably, Sudan's position has shifted to a pro-Saudi stance even after the fall of former President Omar al-Bashir and the dramatic change in the Sudanese government.⁴⁶⁸

f. The Use of Proxies in the Syrian Uprisings by Saudi Arabia

The Saudi regime perceives the role Syria plays in strengthening its main external adversary, Iran. Since Saudi Arabia sees Iran's expanding influence to impact its domestic environment and the formation of the so-called "Shia crescent" that include Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as threatening, the uprising in Syria served as an opportunity for Riyadh to balance Iran. Moreover, the alliance between Iran and Syria represents the core of the so-called "Axis of Resistance," which, besides the two nations, involves Hamas and Hezbollah.

Indeed, the awakening in Syria constituted an exciting occasion for Riyadh to seek to influence Damascus.⁴⁶⁹ Although Damascus is the traditional ally of Tehran, Riyadh hoped to attract the regime to its sphere of influence.⁴⁷⁰ Thus, during the initial stage of the uprisings in Syria, Saudi Arabia supported the Assad regime. According to Yehuda U. Blanga, Saudi and Syrian officials met in April and May 2011 in which Riyadh *"provided 275 million rials in assistance to Syria. What is more, the Saudi media*

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ Donelli, Dentice, "Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa," pp. 126–42.

⁴⁶⁷ Murat Sofuoglu, "Why Are Sudan's Protesters Snubbing the UAE and Saudi Arabia?" *TRT World*, 04/26/2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-are-sudan-s-protesters-snubbing-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia-26179>.

⁴⁶⁸ Feierstein, "The Impact of Middle East Regional Competition on Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa."

⁴⁶⁹ Ennis, Momani, "Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies," pp. 1127–44.

⁴⁷⁰ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," p. 22

refrained from attacking Assad and his regime, even after the United States proclaimed the Syrian president illegitimate."⁴⁷¹

Riyadh's beginning of a more incisive action regarding its participation in the Syrian conflict begins only in the summer of 2011 when King Abdullah demanded that the Assad government cease the violent pressure on protests and effect reforms. With the Syrian leader's refusal to meet Saudi Arabia's demand and tightening of its ties with Iran, the kingdom starts to seek the deposition of the Syrian leader, an attempt to expand its sphere of influence vis-à-vis Tehran.⁴⁷² *"Additionally, the fall of Assad might weaken Iran's regional power status. Thus, while the Riyadh regime was supporting opposition and launching initiatives against the Assad regime, Iran supported the Syrian leadership with weapons and fighting units."*⁴⁷³ However, Riyadh's plans for the Syrian state are not the mere removal of Assad from leading the country. Hassan Hassan captures the Saudi regime's true intention, which is structuring a gradual transition of power, maintaining the structures of state agencies and attracting Syria to its area of influence to the detriment of Iran.

Moreover, Riyadh used as a pretext the support for the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people to get rid of the Assad regime and eventually redirect it towards its sphere of influence.⁴⁷⁴ Thus, weakening its main enemy, Iran, in the region constitutes Saudi foreign policy's core. Saudi Arabia has tried to reaffirm its influence in the region vis-à-vis that of Iran through Arab alliances, especially by forming a Sunni Arab coalition that would confront Iranian expansion and toppling the Syrian regime by supporting the opposition with money and weapons.⁴⁷⁵

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⁴⁷¹ Yehuda U. Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War," *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. XXIV (2017).

⁴⁷² Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War."

⁴⁷³ Nazife Selcen Pinar Akgul, "From Stillness to Aggression: The Policy of Saudi Arabia towards Syria after the Arab Spring," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 6, no. 9 (2016), p. 41.

⁴⁷⁴ Bassel F Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," *International Spectator*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2013), pp. 32–46, doi:10.1080/03932729.2013.787830.

⁴⁷⁵ Riedel, "Why Saudi Arabia Is Vulnerable to Islamic State."

⁴⁷⁶ Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," pp. 32–46.

policy. Riyadh pressured the Arab League to request UN intervention in Syria after Syria's representative rejected Assad's call to step down in February 2012.⁴⁷⁷ However, there was a deadlock at the UN Security Council regarding this possible intervention in Syria caused by Chinese and Russian vetoes. Consequently, Saudi Arabia took a step of not occupying its chair as a rotating member at the UNSC in November 2013.⁴⁷⁸

In parallel with its activism in multilateral forums against Assad's regime, Saudi Arabia has been active behind the scenes, supporting insurgent groups in Syria. First, Riyadh waited for the United States to organize political action for Syria jointly. Then, Saudi Arabia hired lobby groups in the US to influence public opinion that would have led to backing oppositions and the eventual removal of the Assad regime by the U.S. without success.⁴⁷⁹

However, seeing Washington's hesitation in establishing connections with groups of Syrian insurgents, Riyadh decided to act on its own to finance and arm the rebels.⁴⁸⁰ As of 2012, Saudi Arabia has been using all its resources to finance groups of Syrian rebels fighting the Assad government. In addition, Riyadh has supported and financed the Free Syrian Army while allowing the mobilizations of Salafi-jihadist groups.⁴⁸¹ The operationalization of this Saudi support to the rebels occurs in coordination with neighbouring and ally Jordan, which opens its border next to Syria for insurgents' passage.

Between 2012 to 2016, Saudi Arabia secretly passed weapons worth more than 1.2 billion euro it obtained mainly from the Balkan countries via Jordan to insurgent groups in Syria.⁴⁸² "When the rebels need weapons, they make their request at an 'operations room' in Amman staffed by agents from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United States."⁴⁸³ Despite the external constraint caused by military dependence on the US, Saudi diplomacy, motivated by their perception of the favourable moment to intervene

⁴⁷⁷ Alistair Lyon, "Arab League Turns to U.N. as Gulf Observers Quit Syria," *Reuters*, 2012.

⁴⁷⁸ Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War."

⁴⁷⁹ Dania Koleilat Khatib, "Arab Gulf States' Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings," p. 32, *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities*, ed. by Dania Koleilat Khatib, Marwa Maziad, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, doi:10.4324/9780429505300.

⁴⁸⁰ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

⁴⁸¹ Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," pp. 32–46.

⁴⁸² Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*. p. 163.

⁴⁸³ Ben Hubbard, "Warily, Jordan Assists Rebels in Syrian War," *The New York Times*, 2014.

indirectly in the conflict, rationally decided. However, Jordan has proven to be a vulnerable and untrustworthy partner, as certain weapons for opposition forces are being traded in the illegal market and end up in terrorists' hands.⁴⁸⁴

Moreover, the Saudi regime uses sectarianism as an instrument of regional policy, controlling Sunni and Shiites' historical divisions and feelings. With religion as an ideological weapon, Saudi Arabia seeks to exalt the division between Sunnis and Shiites to gain more support for its regional ambition at the expense of Iran and its allies.⁴⁸⁵ Crystal A. Ennis and Bessma Momani succinctly encapsulated the above scenario below,

*“Viewed through this lens of sectarianism and attempts to offset Iranian influence, the protests in Syria presented an opportunity to the Al Sauds. [...] With a majority Sunni population, the uprising in Syria was seen as a chance to bring Syria back into the Arab, and Sunni, sphere of influence. This would consequently increase Saudi Arabia's friends in the region and drastically improve its position in Lebanon.”*⁴⁸⁶

The support of the Saudi regime's opposition in Syria constituted one of the prerogatives of Omnibalancing theory, which suggested aiding insurgent groups relatively cheap and effective way for states to assert their interest in an opponent domestic environment.⁴⁸⁷

g. Saudi Arabia in the Horn of Africa

Recently, diplomatic activities involving security and peace agreements have been included in Saudi Arabia's economy-centred interaction efforts in the region. The countries around the region, especially Sudan, has been a vital ally of Tehran for decades, while Eritrea and Somalia have also proven to be sympathetic partners for Tehran.⁴⁸⁸ Therefore, it is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia has been growing its involvement in the Horn of Africa since 2008, owing to Tehran's political advocacy and alignment with

⁴⁸⁴ Mark Mazzetti, Ali Younes, “C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, 06/26/2016; Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*.

⁴⁸⁵ Gause, “Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East.”

⁴⁸⁶ Ennis, Momani, “Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies,” pp. 1135–36.

⁴⁸⁷ David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” pp. 233–56.

⁴⁸⁸ Feierstein, “The Impact of Middle East Regional Competition on Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa.”

Khartoum, Asmara and Djibouti until 2015. However, as the fight against insurgents in Yemen in 2015 escalated and appeared in the Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy war, the geopolitical constellations on the Horn suddenly shifted.⁴⁸⁹

Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen to counter what it considered Iran's proxy made the Horn of Africa of strategic importance for Riyadh. Should Tehran maintain its foothold in the Horn of Africa, the perception of the threat of the regime in Riyadh will be on the increase. As such, the regime in Saudi Arabia advanced to forestall Tehran's influence in the region. Since Saudi Arabia's regime aims to balance Tehran's threat that links to its domestic environment, Iran's growing influence must be checked as more influence means more trouble for the Saudi regime.

The Horn of Africa's coast was an essential point for smugglers wishing to reach Yemen, highlighting the importance of securing the region for Saudi Arabia since 2015 following the military operations against the Houthis in Yemen. Because the coalition fighting in Yemen could not find the support it wanted from the Horn of Africa countries, they tried to block these countries' way by activating economic and diplomatic channels against Iran and Qatar's commercial and diplomatic initiatives. The Gulf crisis in 2017 that led to Qatar's blockade by the quartet has led leaders of the two sides in the conflict to increase competition for the expansion of their regional alliances, especially in the Horn of Africa.

Eritrea shifted sides from Iran and Qatar when it was generously paid for its military abandoning the harbour town of Assab in the Yemen war against the Houthis. The US War on Terror and foreign sanctions guided Eritrea into the Iranian axis of rebellion in dispute with its neighbours (Yemen, Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti). Access to Eritrea and Somalia, along with control of the Yemeni Houthis, could increase Iran's ability to threaten international shipping around the Bab al-Mandeb, which connects the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Tehran's interest in demonstrating its capacity to challenge

⁴⁸⁹ Federico Donelli, Giuseppe Dentice, "Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa," *International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2020), p. 6, doi:10.1080/03932729.2019.1706389.

shipping in the Red Sea has been evident in a series of ship, military and commercial attacks.⁴⁹⁰

Tehran's naval access to Asmara's ports has been its significant strategic asset, given that it was allowed access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which means a strong naval position in Riyadh's backyard.⁴⁹¹ Asmara has raised worry in Saudi Arabia because it decided to allow Iran to berth its military and merchant ships at Assab and Massawa ports.⁴⁹² Moreover, via Eritrea, arms were shipped to Iran's proxies in Yemen, Lebanon and Gaza.⁴⁹³ Saudi relations with Eritrea strengthened after the Riyadh-Asmara security agreement in 2015.⁴⁹⁴ The agreement came when the Iranian leadership acknowledged that its relations with Eritrea would have damaged their international prestige as their primary focus was on the nuclear agreement. The Saudi bloc has been swift to fill the vacuum with financial support and diplomatic attempts to get Asmara back to the world stage. Alignment with the Saudi bloc guided Asmara to render the Port of Assab a logistical centre to function in Yemen, both naval and aviation.

Djibouti's friendly ties with Tehran could allow arms shipment to Houthis in Yemen. Following the signing of a joint security cooperation agreement with Djibouti, the Saudis also strengthened economic cooperation through a joint economic summit in March 2017.⁴⁹⁵ The ties with Djibouti has given Riyadh an upper hand in its rivalry with Iran in the region. While Saudi Arabia was in talks with Djibouti to create a military base, it was disrupted by growing strains between Djibouti and the UAE due to the nationalization of the Doraleh port in 2014 that the DP World hitherto managed.⁴⁹⁶ In Somalia, the Saudis invested millions of dollars to support the country's annual budget after Mogadishu announced severing ties with Iran.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁰ Feierstein, "The Impact of Middle East Regional Competition on Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa."

⁴⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁹² *ibid.* p. 7.

⁴⁹³ Matthias Schwarz, "Arms Transfers in the Gulf of Aden. Shining the Spotlight on Regional Dynamics," *Peace and Research Institute Frankfurt*, 03/24/2021, <https://blog.prif.org/2021/03/24/arms-transfers-in-the-gulf-of-aden-shining-the-spotlight-on-regional-dynamics/>.

⁴⁹⁴ "Special Report Red Sea Peace Initiatives: Saudi Arabia's Role in the Eritrea-Ethiopia Rapprochement," 04/2020.

⁴⁹⁵ "Saudi, Djibouti Sign Economic Cooperation Agreement," *Arab News*, 12/22/2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1212961/saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁷ "Somalia Received Saudi Aid the Day It Cut Ties with Iran: Document," *Reuters*, 01/17/2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-saudi-iran-idUSKCN0UV0BH>.

h. Saudi Arabia's Interference in Tehran's Domestic Affairs Via the Support of Dissidents

As a way of directly balancing Iran, since the Arab Uprisings, it maintained some level of diplomatic relations until 2016. After that, Saudi Arabia completely severed its diplomatic relations with Tehran following Saudi Arabia's execution of a Shiite cleric and the protest that ensued and culminated in the razing down of the Saudi diplomatic facility in Iran. Although the Iranian government has condemned the mob action and distanced itself from the happenings, "the aggressive statements of the Iranian regime encouraged the attacks on Saudi missions."⁴⁹⁸ The consequence has been severing diplomatic ties with Tehran. Prior to the dispute, Saudi Arabia's maintenance of relations with Tehran can be viewed as a way of appeasing its secondary rival that has always found a way of meddling in its internal affairs as per Omnibalancing theory. Yet, while diplomatic relations lasted, Tehran did not stop its aggressive activities, especially in Saudi Arabia's neighbours (supporting Houthis and other Shia militias and meddling in Bahrain). Therefore, its stability is read as having a direct impact on the regime by the House of Saud.

Moreover, in 2016, Saudi Arabia's contacts with ethnic and religious groups, which can influence the situation in Iran from within, intensified. Thus, on July 9, 2016, a conference of the Iranian opposition, the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), was held in Paris.⁴⁹⁹ The MEK, which is responsible for thousands of death in Iran, has been considered a terrorist group in Tehran.⁵⁰⁰ At the conference, the ex-head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Turki al-Faisal, who still significantly influenced Saudi politics, expressed solidarity with the Iranian opposition forces, aiming to overthrow the regime and promised them all possible support.⁵⁰¹ As he noted, "Your legitimate struggle against the (Iranian) regime will achieve its goal, sooner or later...I, too, want the fall of the regime."⁵⁰² By this move, "the MEK has turned into Saudi Arabia's instrument to bash

⁴⁹⁸ Ghazanfar Ali Khan, "Saudi Arabia Severs Iran Ties," *Arab News*, 01/03/2016.

⁴⁹⁹ Arash Karami, "Saudi Prince's Endorsement of MEK Angers Iranian Officials," *Al-Monitor*, 07/11/2016.

⁵⁰⁰ Fereshteh Sadeghi, "Is Saudi Arabia Really Seeking Regime Change in Iran?," *Al-Monitor*, 07/26/2016.

⁵⁰¹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰² Reuters, "Iran Says Saudis Back Terrorism after Senior Prince Attends Rebel Rally," *Reuters*, 07/10/2016.

Iran.”⁵⁰³ At the same time, the Saudi prince pointed to many internal enemies of Iran's regime while noting oppressed religious and ethnic minorities (Arabs, Kurds, Baluchis, Azeris, Turkmen, Jews, Christians, and other Sunni and Ismaili Shia sect).⁵⁰⁴ According to Ali Younesi, “The Saudis are trying to revive threats ... by activating several opposition groups, including the MEK, or Kurdish militants in Iraq’s semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region and Baluch militants in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province.”⁵⁰⁵

Furthermore, in the same year, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) took up arms against the IRGC to violate the PDKI ceasefire that had lasted since 1996.⁵⁰⁶ Although Iran accuses Saudi Arabia of supporting the Kurds in Iran, Saudi Arabia and even the PDKI deny having any link.⁵⁰⁷ More recently, the Iranian government accused Saudi Arabia of supplying tons of modern arms to Sunni separatist in Baluchistan and Sistan. As General Mohammad Pakpour, the commander of the IRGCs ground forces stated, “at least three plane-loads of arms and equipment” was supplied to the groups by Saudi Arabia and their allies in the region.”⁵⁰⁸

It can be stated that the crisis in Iranian-Saudi relations is entering a new phase when Riyadh begins to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs to achieve its goals and directly support the group, which the Iranian leadership qualifies as a terrorist. This approach differs from Riyadh's traditional foreign policy orientation, which preferred to remain in the background in conflict situations. This approach of supporting groups opposing states in line with Omnibalancing theory which states that leaders may opt for supporting dissident groups that are against a given government because it is cheaper to handle than wars.

i. Saudi Arabia’s Meddling in Lebanon

Lebanon is a country with Sunni, Shia and Christian, and the government is a form of consociationalism agreed among the groups above. Hezbollah, a political party and

⁵⁰³ Sadeghi, “Is Saudi Arabia Really Seeking Regime Change in Iran? .”

⁵⁰⁴ Al-Faisal Turki, كلمة تركي الفيصل رئيس الاستخبارات السعودية الاسبق في مؤتمر المعارضة الإيرانية بباريس, YouTube - AlNahar AlYouni, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfUvT4v-kfg>.

⁵⁰⁵ Sadeghi, “Is Saudi Arabia Really Seeking Regime Change in Iran?”

⁵⁰⁶ Garrett Nada, Caitlin Crahan, “Iran’s Troubled Provinces: Kurdistan,” *The Iran Primer*, 09/08/2020.

⁵⁰⁷ Babak Dehghanpisheh, “To Iranian Eyes, Kurdish Unrest Spells Saudi Incitement,” *Reuters*, 09/04/2016,

⁵⁰⁸ Radio Farda, “Iran Guards’ Commander Says US, Saudis Supplying Arms To Militant Groups,” *Radio Farda*, 02/19/2020.

militant group, was created in 1985 during the Lebanese civil war as a response to the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 1978 and 1982. Inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution, Hezbollah took up arms against Israeli occupation. During its creation, Hezbollah's manifesto shows the ideological link between the nascent group and Iran. They voiced loyalty to Khomeini, who advocated for governments to be led by *Wilayat al-faqih* (rule by the Islamic Jurist guardianship). Indeed, Hezbollah affirms that

*"We, the sons of [Hezbollah's ummah], whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which has established the nucleus of the world's central Islamic state, abide by the orders of a single, wise, and just command represented by [wilayat al-faqih], currently embodied in the supreme [Ayatollah Khomeini] ... who has detonated the Muslims' revolution, and who is bringing about the glorious Islamic renaissance."*⁵⁰⁹

Iran used this opportunity to fund and train Hezbollah via the IRGC, and since then, Iran has a direct influence in Lebanon. The Iranian financing of Hezbollah, including military aid, is approximately \$25-50 million annually.⁵¹⁰ During the Syrian uprisings, the Russian involvement, Iranian support, which included sending the IRGC to fight with Syrian government troops, reinforced the regime against opposition and reversed the success of the Syrian opposition movements and their foreign supporters of which Saudi Arabia was among. In the vacuum left, the Syrian army and Shiite militia led by Hezbollah under Iranian coordination were left to fill the void.⁵¹¹ Hezbollah is part of the strategic alliance dubbed as the "axis of resistance" with the Syrian government and Iran and other militias controlled by Iran, such as the PMF in Iraq.⁵¹²

In February 2016, Saudi Arabia reported Hezbollah had been providing the Houthi rebels of Yemen with missiles. It accompanied a video clip from the government of Yemen depicting Hezbollah instructors' efforts to train the Houthi to carry out a terrorist act in Saudi Arabia. Along the frontiers of Riyadh in the north, Iraq-based Kataib Hezbollah's activities have become challenging to extricate from Hezbollah in Lebanon,

⁵⁰⁹ Hizballah's Documents, p.49 quoted from Jason Wimberly, "Wilayat Al-Faqih in Hizballah's Web of Concepts: A Perspective on Ideology," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 51, no. 5 (2015), p. 8, doi:10.1080/00263206.2015.1012507.

⁵¹⁰ May Darwich, *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region*, p. 98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

⁵¹¹ Yaron Friedman, "Why Is Saudi Arabia so Determined to Destroy Hezbollah?" 12/11/2017.

⁵¹² Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," New York, 2014, www.understandingwar.org.

notably after it started working with the IRGC to establish a supply line through Al-Anbar into South Syria. Hezbollah's military involvement in Iraq was substantiated by its leader on 6 March 2016.⁵¹³

In the Lebanese domestic sphere, Hezbollah remains Tehran's reliable partner.⁵¹⁴ Apart from this connection, Hezbollah has aided the Houthi rebels with missiles used to attack Saudi Arabia.⁵¹⁵ Against this background, the Saudi regime sees Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy in Lebanon. Indeed, Lebanon constitutes an area where the Saudi regime felt Tehran's rising influence and one of the main pillars of the "Shia Crescent" and the resistance axis against American and Saudi interests of stability and survival. Concerning the gradual increase of Tehran's influence, Mshari al-Dyadhi articulated, "*examine all the big Arab portfolios – Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. They are being stolen from Arab hands ... and turned over to Iranian hands gradually.*"⁵¹⁶ Therefore, Saudi Arabia sees Lebanon as an arena to balance its threat perception emanating from Iran.

To counter Iranian influence seen in its strategic alliance with Syria and Hezbollah in the Levant, Riyadh influenced the Arab League to proscribe Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.⁵¹⁷ Hezbollah's designation as a terrorist organisation helps the Riyadh regime clamp down on activists no matter how loosely attached to it.⁵¹⁸

Moreover, Saudi Arabia forced Saad Hariri, the Lebanese Prime Minister, to resign on the 4th of November 2017.⁵¹⁹ While reading his resignation letter from Riyadh, Hariri stressed the Iranian role in "*devastation, desolation and chaos wherever it goes...I want to tell Iran and its followers that it will lose in its interventions in the internal affairs*

⁵¹³ Matteo Legrenzi, Fred H. Lawson, "Saudi Arabia Calls Out Hezbollah: Why Now?" *Middle East Policy*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2016), pp. 31–43, doi:10.1111/mepo.12193.

⁵¹⁴ Lina Khatib, "Saudi-Iranian Rivalry over Lebanon Is Far from over Hezbollah Has Always Been Iran's Trusted Ally in Lebanon, and Its Pragmatic Alliances with Actors in Lebanon Such as the Free Patriotic Movement Have Gained It More Influence," *Middle East Eye*, 02/14/2019.

⁵¹⁵ Hussein Malla, "Hezbollah Denies Providing Missile Fired at Saudi Arabia from Yemen," *The Globe and Mail*, 11/20/2017.

⁵¹⁶ Frederic Wehrey, "What's Behind Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Anxiety?," *CERI Strategy Papers*, 2012. p. 22.

⁵¹⁷ "Arab League Labels Hezbollah a 'Terrorist' Group," *Al Jazeera*, 03/12/2016.

⁵¹⁸ Legrenzi, Lawson, "Saudi Arabia Calls Out Hezbollah: Why Now?," pp. 31–43.

⁵¹⁹ Anne Barnard, Maria Abi-Habib, "Why Saad Hariri Had That Strange Sojourn in Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, 12/24/2017.

of Arab countries.”⁵²⁰ Hariri’s resignation timing is linked to details he obtained regarding anti-Hezbollah operations Riyadh intends to conduct in the immediate future.

Prior to Hariri’s resignation, Saudi Arabia withdrew the \$4 billion aid it pledged to the Lebanese military due to Lebanon’s “negative, offensive and bizarre positions against pan-Arab consensus.”⁵²¹ The reason for taking this action was Lebanon’s failure to officially condemn the Saudi embassy attack in Iran, which could imply that Iran is controlling the government of Lebanon. As Giorgio Cafiero noted, Lebanon “... *has come under excessive Iranian influence and that Hezbollah has gained too much power in its security architecture.*”⁵²²

j. Alignment with Israel

Riyadh has no diplomatic relations with Jerusalem; however, a closer look shows the countries are closer than they seem. Tehran’s increasing influence in the Middle East, apparent after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict, worried the regime in Riyadh of Tehran’s penetration of Beirut and the support it gives to Hamas posed a significant danger to Riyadh’s position in the region.⁵²³ Moreover, the Saudi-Israeli clandestine relationship continued to grow as questions over nuclear Iran arose. As far back as 2009, Riyadh reportedly checked its air defence systems to determine Israel’s potential to attack nuclear sites. Nevertheless, the regime is concerned about public opinion should it supported Jerusalem strike Iran.⁵²⁴ Tellingly, it was claimed that Israel got a warning from Riyadh that it will shoot down any of its fighter jet entering the Saudi airspace to assault Tehran.⁵²⁵

But there are changes in the region that directly impact Israel. With the end of the government of Mubarak, Egypt, Israel’s main regional ally, the future of peace agreement

⁵²⁰ Bill Law, “Are the Saudis Set to Turn up the Heat on Lebanon?” *Al Jazeera*, 09/17/2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/9/17/are-the-saudis-set-to-turn-up-the-heat-on-lebanon/>.

⁵²¹ Josh Wood, “Saudi Arabia Cancels \$4bn Aid Package for Lebanon’s Security Forces,” *The National*, 02/19/2016.

⁵²² “The Saudi-Iranian Battle over Lebanon,” *TRT World*, 02/13/2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/the-saudi-iranian-battle-over-lebanon-24097>.

⁵²³ Jacob Abadi, “Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2019), p. 433, doi:10.1080/00263206.2018.1509853.

⁵²⁴ Samuel Ramani, “Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties with The Gulf Monarchies,” *HuffPost*, 12/09/2017; Usjid U Hameed, “The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: A Foreign Policy Analysis Approach,” *Towson University Journal of International Affairs*, vol. L, no. 2 (2017), pp. 16–34.

⁵²⁵ Yoel Guzansky, “Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?” *Israel Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2015), pp. 131–47, doi:10.1080/13537121.2014.984424.

in force since 1979 is being called into question by some especially given the performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian elections in late 2011. The post-Mubarak government also facilitated an agreement between Fatah and Hamas, seeking to form a coalition government of technocrats until elections are held.⁵²⁶ Indeed, Barry Lando noted, “[w]ith most of Israel’s traditional allies in the region sent packing or undermined by the Arab Spring, the Saudis are the Jewish State’s last chance to protect its political interests in the Arab world.”⁵²⁷

In the Syrian upheavals, Tel-Aviv fears that Tehran will use its power in Syria as a way to strengthen its position, physically as well as through its proxies, with sophisticated military resources in its backyard. Since then, the foreign policy objective of Israel’s in the region has been preventing Iran from being embedded in Syria.⁵²⁸ In addition, Saudi Arabia and Israel became frustrated at America’s inability to use force against Assad after it crossed the red line of using chemical weapons on its populace. After Assad decided to negotiate with a Russian proposal that the arsenal of chemical agents should be destroyed, the American government supported it.⁵²⁹

Iran, which Riyadh and Tel Aviv deem their regional sworn enemy, is the most critical factor behind the current warming of ties. At an Arab conference in Tunis, the Foreign Affairs Minister of Saudi Arabia noted that “Iran [is] the biggest threat that is challenging the Arab world.”⁵³⁰ Correspondingly, Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted, “If you asked most of the governments and most of the leaders in the Middle East: What is the principle [sic] barrier to peace? What is the greatest threat to our security? They would say three things: Iran, Iran, and Iran.”⁵³¹ Prince Alwaleed bin Talal averred, “[f]or the first

⁵²⁶ BBC News, “Fatah-Hamas Unity Government: Israel Condemns Move,” *BBC News*, 02/07/2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16918834>.

⁵²⁷ Tzvi Ben Gedalyahu, “Saudi Arabia Funds Mossad Anti-Iran Operations,” *Israel National News*, 2012.

⁵²⁸ The Times of Israel, “Ashkenazi Tells Russian FM Iranian Entrenchment in Syria Must Be Prevented,” *The Times of Israel*, 10/26/2020; Marta Furlan, “Israeli–Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2019), pp. 173–87, doi:10.1080/23739770.2019.1670500.

⁵²⁹ Guzansky, “Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?” pp. 131–47.

⁵³⁰ Iran International, “Saudi Arabia: Iran Is the Biggest Threat to the Arab World,” *Iran International*, 03/30/2019.

⁵³¹ Benjamin Netanyahu, “Benjamin Netanyahu on Twitter: ‘If You Asked Most of the Governments and Most of the Leaders in the Middle East: What Is the Principal Barrier to Peace? What Is the Greatest Threat to Our Security? They Would Say Three Things: Iran, Iran, and Iran.’ / Twitter,” 2018, <https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/998842247461433344?lang=en>.

time, Saudi Arabian interests and Israel are almost parallel. It's incredible."⁵³² The assumption that the US is hesitant to use force in the region, combined with the concern that America is pivoting to Asia, and Iran's geopolitical advances, which gives it an upper hand in the possibility of policing the region, might have prompted Riyadh to come to terms with Israel even if it is in a limited way.⁵³³

A nuclear Iran, perceived by both Saudi Arabia and Israel as a security vulnerability, has brought both sides to strengthen the clandestine partnership. While Saudi collaboration with Israel was reported to not apply to issues of security significance, prominent Israeli security authorities are still assumed to have formed channels of contact with Saudi Arabia.⁵³⁴ Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Israel were troubled that the United States would finally rekindle its partnership with Tehran, frozen since the revolution in 1979.⁵³⁵ Therefore, during the nuclear negotiation with Iran, both Riyadh and Tel Aviv both worked by pressuring the stakeholders (i.e., the five permanent members of the security council of the UN plus Germany) to ensure the deal did not materialize. As Prince Talal noted, Riyadh is exerting "maximum pressure now on the United States not to succumb to the president of Iran's soft talk."⁵³⁶ Failing in that objective, they both denounced the deal because they shared the view that the deal could make Iran an atomic power threshold country and asynchronously overcome its western sanctions, thereby giving it the ability to extend its influence in the region and even beyond. As such, believing that the deal jeopardized mutual interests in the region, they reinforced intelligence sharing. In addition, they strengthened clandestine cooperation even in the field of security as both nations coordinated military drills to target Iran's nuclear sites.⁵³⁷ According to Fred Burton, Mossad officers have long been making a fortune from selling the Saudis intelligence information and equipment.⁵³⁸

⁵³² Simon Henderson, "No One in the Middle East Will Sleep," *The Atlantic*, 11/25/2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/11/no-one-in-the-middle-east-will-sleep/281845/>.

⁵³³ Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" pp. 131–47; Furlan, "Israeli–Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?" pp. 173–87.

⁵³⁴ Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" p. 139.

⁵³⁵ *ibid.* p. 140.

⁵³⁶ Henderson, "No One in the Middle East Will Sleep."

⁵³⁷ Ramani, "Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties With The Gulf Monarchies."

⁵³⁸ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," pp. 433–49.

k. Maintenance of Alliance with the West

One of the components of Omnibalancing balancing is the alliance of countries with foreign powers. In the Gulf, there is close cooperation due to the symmetry of the interests of the Western world with the monarchies. This cooperation can be seen in both political and military fields. Saudi Arabia maintained its alliance with the West and the US, in particular, to balance Iran and gain support for its endeavours in the region. Saudi Arabia's enduring alliance with the US, UK and France gave it an edge in its military capability to feel secure from the threats it perceives.-Riyadh has received international support during its intervention in Bahrain and its war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. One of its support is the sale of advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia, which the US and some European countries have made huge profits.⁵³⁹

Alliance building is not limited to the regional level, as such, states seek to attract foreign allies to maintain themselves. What strengthens the US presence in the balancing strategy of Saudi Arabia is the mutual US interests in this context: Washington seeks to distance itself from its post-2000s policy of playing a key military role in regional conflicts, thereby placing the brunt of the war on regional powers. Moreover, after years of buying advanced weapons and ammunition, the Saudis and GCC countries are now able to wage relatively complex battles (for example, in Yemen).

Riyadh has strengthened its military alliance with the USA due to the rising influence of Iran in the Gulf and beyond. Following the nuclear deal with Iran, Saudi Arabia took part in the US-GCC Summit at Camp David in May 2015, reaffirming Washington's assurance to the Gulf's defence and pushing for a new policy alliance with them.⁵⁴⁰ Moreover, the US deployed THAAD and Patriot air defence batteries some 200 soldiers to Saudi Arabia following missile attacks on Saudi oil installations to bolster the kingdom's defence capability.⁵⁴¹ Furthermore, amid the rising tension with Iran that

⁵³⁹ Julia Glum, "Saudi Arabia's Youth Unemployment Problem Among King Salman's Many New Challenges After Abdullah's Death," *International Business Times*, 01/23/2015.

⁵⁴⁰ Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies," pp. 95–112.

⁵⁴¹ VOA, "US Deploys Air Defense Systems, Troops to Saudi Arabia," *Voice of America*, 09/2019.

ensued due to the assassination of Qassim Soleimani by an American drone strike in Iraq, the US deployed over 4,000 troops to the region.⁵⁴²



⁵⁴² Richard Sisk, “Thousands More US Troops Deploying to Middle East in Response to Iranian Threats,” *Military.Com*, 01/2020.

CHAPTER FOUR

THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF THE UAE

I. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF THE UAE IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

1. The UAE, Iran and the Islamic Revolution

After the victory of the Islamic revolution, the UAE officially declared its desire to maintain good relations with the new regime. The Iranian Transitional Government headed by Mahdi Bazargan was congratulated on 13 February 1979 by Abu Dhabi and Dubai leaders. Dubai underlined the two countries shared Islamic heritage and expressed hope that bilateral ties could be strengthened per the basic Islamic goals. Similarly, Khomeini wrote to the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheik Zayed, voicing his thanks “for the UAE President, government and people, based on their stance towards the revolution.” At the same time, upon returning from an extensive mission to Iran, the Emirati Minister of Justice and Endowments invited “Muslims to support the Iranian revolution.”⁵⁴³ Furthermore, the UAE sent felicitous messages to Bani Sadr, the recently elected president of Iran, in which it expressed its intention to strengthen bilateral relations. Throughout his visit to Abu Dhabi on 30 April 1980, Sheik Zayed and Iranian Minister for Foreign Affairs *Sadeq* Qotbzadeh spoke about forms of improving bilateral ties based “on good neighbourliness and Islamic fraternity.”⁵⁴⁴

However, Iran’s rhetoric of exporting its revolution culminated in the emergence of opposition movements in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, shaped the position of the countries in the Gulf. Moreover, there was a concern as the UAE has an Iranian population of about 600,000 of which among them are intelligence officers who the UAE is monitoring.⁵⁴⁵ Given the size of the Iranian population in the UAE, a spill over of the

⁵⁴³ René Rieger, “The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990,” 2013.

⁵⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ William A. Rugh, “The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1996), p. 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4328896.pdf>.

revolution could easily enshroud the kingdom. In addition, the UAE is worried about hostile activities that Iranians may affect it.

Against this background, some anxiety was triggered by meetings of Iranian religious leaders that have links to Khomeini with Shia groups of Iranian origin in the UAE and the declaration by the President of Iran that “Iran would support any Islamic movement in any Arab country, on principle, regardless of whether or not there were relations with the ruling regime.” Also, the Iranian *modus operandi* of dealing with the emirates that constitute the federation separately only augments the already existing fear of dividing the UAE rulers.⁵⁴⁶ Given that Tehran denounced the status quo and questioned the validity of the regimes in the Gulf, it poses a threat to the survival of the regimes in the Gulf. Iran declared the hereditary monarchy to be false and invalid and that the essential duty of a real Islamic government was the elimination of the entire monarchy.⁵⁴⁷

2. The UAE, Iran and the Three Islands

The primary source of threat to the UAE is related to its islands seized by Iran. In the past few decades, territorial conflicts between the Gulf countries have become indispensable realities of regional relations in the Middle East. These conflicts' historical roots go back to a distant past, in the era of colonial seizures and the division of these territories into spheres of influence of the Western powers. In the previous centuries, many of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz islands changed hosts several times, passing under the control of Arabs, Portuguese, Persians and British. At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 20th century, Persia (Iran) was slipping into complete political and economic decline. The country gradually lost its territory and independence, turning into a semi-colony. Under these conditions, Persia could not successfully counteract the British Empire, which was at the zenith of its power.⁵⁴⁸ The British were able to subdue many of the Gulf islands, including the three small islands, which Persia considered their own.

Formally, the island of Abu Musa was considered part of the emirate of Sharjah, and the Greater and Lesser Tunb part of the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, which was part

⁵⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁴⁷ Kamrava, “Iran-Qatar Relations,” pp. 167–88.

⁵⁴⁸ Lyman H. Stebbins, “British Imperialism, Regionalism, and Nationalism in Iran, 1890-1919,” *Iran Facing Other: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*, ed. by Abbas Amanat, Farzin Vejdani, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, pp. 153–71.

of the British protectorate. British troops were stationed in them, and Britain oversaw all foreign policy issues.⁵⁴⁹ But Persia, all this time, did not wholly abandon its claims to these territories, although it could not do anything. In strategic terms, the significance of these three islands can be compared with Gibraltar, which is located at the Mediterranean Sea entrance of Aden at the access to the Red Sea. That is why their affiliation is still the subject of a sharp territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Greater Tunb is located 12 km south of the Iranian island of Qesh; the diameter of the island is about 2.5 miles. Lesser Tunb is an uninhabited and waterless rock situated 3 km southwest of the Greater Tunb.⁵⁵⁰ At 50 km south of the Greater Tunb lies the largest of the disputed islands, Abu Musa. This is a low-lying island of about 7 km square, covered with dunes with sparse vegetation and palm groves, verdant around water sources.

The question of the territorial affiliation of the three islands (Abu Musa, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs) is complicated because they are located approximately at an equal distance both from the coast of Iran and from the shores of the United Arab Emirates. In turn, the issue of maritime borders and the delimitation of the coastal territories of the states of the Gulf region still do not have the necessary statutory basis for its solution. The situation around these islands remained constantly tense until the early 1970s. After Britain left the region to the ‘east of Suez’ in 1971, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi declared that the entire responsibility for maintaining peace in the Middle East was now placed on Iran. As Peter Hellyer noted

“While these claims had been muted and effectively abandoned for several decades, due in part to diplomatic support from Britain for the two emirates with whom it was in treaty relations, the announcement by Britain in 1968 that it was to leave the Gulf by the end of 1971 prompted Iran’s Shah not only to revive the claim, but also to make it clear that he would secure his objectives by force, if necessary. Thus two months before the date set for the British withdrawal, the

⁵⁴⁹ “United Arab Emirates: Country Profile,” 2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/staff/hr/Country-Profile-United-Arab-Emirates.pdf>.

⁵⁵⁰ Richard A Mobley, “The Tunbs and Abu Musa Islands: Britain’s Perspective,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 57, no. 4 (2003), p. 628.

Shah stated: 'we need them (the islands); we shall have them; no power on earth shall stop us'’’⁵⁵¹

On November 29, Iran and the Emirate of Sharjah formally agreed on the control of Abu Musa Island, which shared the island's control and its oil resources. However, neither Iran nor Sharjah renounced its claim of total sovereignty over the island.⁵⁵²

At the same time, Iran failed to reach a similar agreement with Ras al-Khaimah's on the Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands. Then Mohammed Reza Pahlavi decided to send troops to occupy both islands on 30 November 1971.⁵⁵³ The seizure of islands by Iran has caused mass protests in the Arab world. In addition to Abu Dhabi's emirate, Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Libya, and Algeria strongly criticised this action. The Iranian invasion also led to an arms race in the Gulf. The small Gulf states fear that the departure of Britain from the region will allow their much stronger neighbours to threaten them. Iran seized the islands just a day before the departure of Britain from the UAE. Iran's aggressive behaviour highlighted the threats recently independent UAE faces as it steered through unpredictable years where there seemed to be virtually no security guarantee from outside.⁵⁵⁴

While reasserting his claims on the islands in 1971, the Shah suggested that Iran will not recognize the UAE until it obtained all of the islands' command and reiterated that no one could stop Iran from having the Islands.⁵⁵⁵ Upon occupying the islands, Iran reiterated the importance of the islands to its secured access to the Strait of Hormuz.⁵⁵⁶ The UAE sought to not complicate relations with Iran, hoping that it would be possible to solve the problem of the islands through negotiations in the future. The emirati minister of foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, noted that *“Despite the great shift from a monarchic to a revolutionary republican system, Iran's [hegemonic] goals in the area have neither*

⁵⁵¹ Peter Hellyer, “Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy,” *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*, ed. by Ibrahim Al Abed, Peter Hellyer, London: Trident Press Ltd, 2001, p. 170.

⁵⁵² Karim Sadjadpour, “The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War,” 2011, www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs. P.11

⁵⁵³ Mobley, “The Tunbs and Abu Musa Islands: Britain's Perspective,” pp. 627–45.

⁵⁵⁴ Kamrava, “Iran-Qatar Realations,” pp. 167–88.

⁵⁵⁵ Hassan H. Al-Alkim, “The Islands Question,” *Security in the Gulf*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2002, p. 159, doi:10.1057/9780230108189_7.

⁵⁵⁶ *ibid.*

shifted nor changed.”⁵⁵⁷ Iran claims that its claim to sovereignty of the islands is based on historical justification. Yet, the UAE strongly disagree and dismisses the assertions as complete nonsense and factually inaccurate.

Moreover, there have been increased fears about Iran’s intentions exacerbated by its interferences. For example, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Iran opposed the decision taken by the United Arab Emirates and the GCC states to request the US coalition forces in the Gulf to deal with Iraq.⁵⁵⁸

From the beginning of the 1980s, Iran began to pursue a policy of capturing the Abu Musa Island. An airport alongside other military and civilian facilities were built on one of the islands. It seems that the main reason for Iran's refusal to return the islands was the ties between the GCC states and Washington and the American military base in the region. As noted by the Iranian President Abolhassan Bani Sadr in March 1980,

*“Evacuate [the islands]? Who is going to take them? To whom do the islands belong? Not to anyone [...] in the south there is Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Oman, Dubai, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia [...] to us these states are connected with the United States and are not independent. At the end of the Gulf there is the Strait of Hormuz through which oil passes. They [the Arab Gulf governments] are afraid of our revolution. If we allow them to have the islands they will control the Strait. In other words the United States would control the waterway [...] If all of them, the littoral states of the Gulf, were independent, we would have returned the islands to them.”*⁵⁵⁹

The UAE accused Iran of violating the Memorandum of Agreement ⁵⁶⁰ signed with Sharjah because Iran increased its presence in Abu Musa in 1992.⁵⁶¹ Iran moved to consolidate its position in the islands by building a maritime office in Abu Musa in 1998.

⁵⁵⁷ Karim Sadjadpour, “The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War,” 2011, www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.

⁵⁵⁸ William A. Rugh, “The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1996), p. 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4328896.pdf>.

⁵⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁶⁰ The MoU signed between Iran and Sharjah determined the jurisdiction of the island of Abu Musa. In accordance with this memorandum, Sharjah agreed to the recognition of Iran’s jurisdiction over the north of the island, provided that the rest of its territory would remain under the jurisdiction of this emirate. Both sides recognized the 12-mile zone of territorial waters surrounding the island.

⁵⁶¹ Sadjadpour, “The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War,” 2011. p.11

Consequently, the move was severely condemned by the UAE.⁵⁶² Iran threatens the use of its facilities at the occupied islands to halt oil flow via the Strait of Hormuz if it is attacked. Since the financial crisis that happened in Dubai in 2008, Abu Dhabi that bailed out Dubai gained influence over it. As a result, the UAE now has a unified position, (i.e., the position of Abu Dhabi) in its dealings with Iran.⁵⁶³

The UAE Foreign Minister, in a statement in April 2010 said that, “The occupation of any Arab land is an occupation...There is no difference between Israel’s occupation to the Golan Heights, southern Lebanon, the West Bank or Gaza, as occupation remains occupation...No Arab land is more precious than another.”⁵⁶⁴ The minister repeated this position in another speech a week later. While such comparisons were sometimes made earlier in the Arab countries, they were never made openly by official representatives of states of such a high rank, which naturally provoked Tehran’s sharp reaction. As the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman called such comparisons “neither right nor well-considered.”⁵⁶⁵ The periodic tensions over the occupied territories escalated after the president of Iran visited Abu Musa in April 2012. Nevertheless, both the UAE and the GCC have preferred a political settlement as the UAE, and Iran recently had some exchange regarding the issue.⁵⁶⁶

3. The UAE and Iran Since the US Invasion of Iraq

The UAE fears Iran’s military build-up. While responding to Iran’s acquisition and modernization of its military, Sheikh Khalifa Ibn Zayed, noted that “*Any country has the right to consolidate its forces, but without carrying out aggression or threatening others ... We are bolstering our defenses to face all crises, but we believe stability in the Gulf will not be achieved through a race for acquiring advanced weapons.*”⁵⁶⁷

Similarly, Muhammad bin Zayed believes that “[t]oday’s conventional Iranian weapons would target the Gulf, while Iran continues to expand its missile program with

⁵⁶² *ibid.*

⁵⁶³ *ibid.* p.10

⁵⁶⁴ Will Fulton, “United Arab Emirates Iran Foreign Relations,” *Critical Threats*, 2010.

⁵⁶⁵ “Iran Dismisses Arab League Statement over Its 3 Islands,” *Tehran Times*, (08/01/2020), <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/216410/Iran-dismisses-Arab-League-statement-over-its-3-islands>.

⁵⁶⁶ Kahwaji, “Arab Cooperation in The Gulf: Are Both Sides Working from The Same Script?” p. 57”

⁵⁶⁷ Lotfian, “A Regional Security System in the Gulf,” p. 117.

the hope of reaching the West.” The evolution around the Iranian nuclear programme is indeed, a source of concern to the UAE. As Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed noted, “we are against Iran acquiring [nuclear capability] [as] any nuclear programme will pose threat to the Gulf region.”⁵⁶⁸ Nothing explains the level of threat perception of the UAE as the public comment made by its envoy to the US, Youssef al-Otaiba, when he was asked whether he would like Washington to act militarily on Iran’s nuclear. He declared,

*“Absolutely, Absolutely. I think we are at risk of an Iranian nuclear program far more than you are at risk. At 7,000 miles away, and with two oceans bordering you, an Iranian nuclear threat does not threaten the continental United States [...] I think out of every country in the region, the UAE is most vulnerable to Iran. Our military, who has existed for the past 40 years, wake up, dream, breathe, eat, sleep the Iranian threat. It’s the only conventional military threat our military plans for, trains for, equips for, that’s it, there’s no other threat, there’s no country in the region that is a threat to the UAE, it’s only Iran. So yes, it’s very much in our interest that Iran does not gain nuclear technology.”*⁵⁶⁹

Moreover, leaked diplomatic cables of the US offered a further indication that the United Arab Emirates considered Iran’s nuclear programme as threatening and called for its halt by all available means. US officials cited Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah as saying that negotiating with Iran is not effective, there are insufficient economic sanctions, and a conventional war with Iran is safer than a nuclear-armed Iran’s long-term repercussions. Nevertheless, the UAE does not want to confront Tehran publicly when the US requested a stronger statement against Iran.⁵⁷⁰

The coming of Ahmadinejad to power in 2005 almost coincides with the rise of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed who came to power in 2004. His coming to power brought hawks together at the centre of authority, and by implication, the UAE has a unified Iranian threat perception.⁵⁷¹ Dubai experienced a financial crunch in 2008; Abu Dhabi bailed it out, and as a consequence, its neutral stance on the Iranian threat diminished.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁸ “Global Security: The Middle East, Eighth Report of Session 2006-07,” *House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee*, 2007.

⁵⁶⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “UAE’s Ambassador Endorses an American Strike on Iran (Cont’d),” *The Atlantic*, 07/2010.

⁵⁷⁰ Sadjadpour, “The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War,” 2011.

⁵⁷¹ Ulrichsen, “Iran-UAE Relations,” pp. 222.

⁵⁷² *ibid.* p. 220.

The UAE as a whole considers Iran with a nuclear weapon as a threat to its survival. For that reason, it has been pressing the US for a military solution to Iran nuclear. The UAE supports the military's use to end Iran's nuclear program if sanctions failed. As noted by its envoy to the US, the long-term advantages of destroying Iran's nuclear facilities outweigh the short-term regional backlash.⁵⁷³ But the US prefers sanctions and requested strict compliance of the UAE to the sanctions.⁵⁷⁴

4. The UAE and Iraq

Iraq possessed all the elements that may constitute a threat to other states, i.e., aggregate power (by 1980, Iraq's defence expenditure was \$2.7 billion and 242,250 men under arms against the UAEs \$750 million defence spending and 25,150 soldiers⁵⁷⁵); offensive power (in the form of a stockpile of missiles and other offensive weapons such as fighter aircraft, battle tanks, among other things. It also supported revolutionaries such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of the occupied Gulf operating against the Gulf monarchs in the 1970s), aggressive intention towards the Gulf monarchies as it is a republic with anti-status quo orientation and geographically, it is close to the UAE.

Nevertheless, the UAE did not see Iraq as threatening. What likely allayed the UAEs fears was that Iraq was engulfed in rivalry with Iran. It supported the UAE since the occupation of its three islands of Abu Musa, Greater and Lower Tunb by Iran. Moreover, Iraq moderated its aggressive stance towards the Arab Gulf monarchies following the Algiers agreement's signing in 1975. Therefore, before Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, the UAE doesn't see Iraq as an imminent threat to its existence. Instead, the UAE see Baghdad as the pioneer model against Iranian expansionism. As such, the UAE opposed any policy that will bring about the breakup of Iraq.

During the Gulf War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, UAEs fear of Saddam further attack on other Gulf states, of which it is part, made it participate in the war for Kuwait's liberation. Saddam Hussein accused the UAE of flooding the world market with its fuel, making petrol cheap and difficult for Iraq to rebuild its ailing economy and military weakened by the Iran-Iraq War. A country Abu Dhabi supported in a war just recently

⁵⁷³ Eli Lake, "U.A.E. Diplomat Mulls Hit on Iran's Nukes," *Washington Times*, 2010.

⁵⁷⁴ Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War," 2011.

⁵⁷⁵ "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 80, no. 1 (1980), pp. 39–50, doi:10.1080/04597228008459903.

had now turned against a fellow Gulf monarch that had not hidden its support to Iraq during its adventure with Iran.

The Iraqi defence budget had increased exponentially to reach \$13.3 billion and 1,000,000 troops and increased capacity compared to 1980. The UAEs' too increased to \$1.59 billion and 44,000 troops in 1990.⁵⁷⁶ That is not a close match to that of Iraq. Not even the GCCs military capability matched that of Iraq (hence, the call for an international coalition to liberate Kuwait). Nevertheless, it is the actions against Kuwait that prompted the UAE to perceive a threat from Iraq. In the form of an ideological sense, the threat is that a fellow monarchy has been removed by force by a republican power with a pan-Arabist, anti-monarchy stance and it could be sooner or later be its turn.

B. BALANCING STRATEGIES

1. Internal Balancing Strategies: Armament (MILEX and Arms Transfers)

During the decade of the Iran-Iraq War, an increase was noticed in the UAE arms expenditure from \$2.985 billion to \$12.51 billion, representing a 138.6% increase compared to the decade preceding the war. Between 1981 and 1985, in a \$28m deal with the US, 1085 TOW anti-tank missiles with 54 launchers and 100 training missiles were delivered to the UAE. In another contract worth \$45m, three air search radar (TPS-70) was delivered in 1987. Between 1983 and 1987, 343 MIM-23B Hawk Surface to Air Missiles (SAM) and I-Hawk SAM system was ordered and delivered to the UAE by the US.⁵⁷⁷

It is noteworthy that France was the highest supplier of weapons to the UAE in the decade of the war (see table 9 below). Between 1983 and 1989, 36 Mirage-2000 aircraft with 36 ATLIS aircraft EO system was ordered and delivered to Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Moreover, more than 2300 anti-tank missiles were delivered to the UAE by France. France's arms supply value to the UAE is around \$1.184 billion, representing 39.66% of its total arms import in the period between 1980 to 1989.

⁵⁷⁶ "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 90, no. 1 (1990), pp. 97–122, doi:10.1080/04597229008460020.

⁵⁷⁷ "SIPRI Trade Registers," (02/11/2019), http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php.

Table 9: Arms Transfers from top suppliers to the UAE from 1970-2020.

	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020	Total
US	83	488	548	4,404	6,951	12,468
France	839	1,126	1,808	4,094	986	8,516
Russia	-	-	1,031	474	578	2,083
UK	254	321	579	3	85	1,227
Germany	93	350	323	122	202	926

Data source: SIPRI TIV. Figures expressed in million USD

Compared to the 1980s, the US's arms transfer to the UAE increased from \$488m to \$548m (see table:7). This change accounts for an increase of 11%, while its total arms purchase in that decade accounted for a 54.4% increase. For example, in 1994, the UAE and US, in another deal of \$27m, 72 AIM-7M Sparrow Beyond Visual Range Air to Air Missile (BVRAAM), was delivered. In that decade, other weapons ordered from the US include 1673 Paveway guided bombs and 24 RGM-84 Harpoon Anti-ship missiles.⁵⁷⁸

France was the largest arms supplier to the UAE until the 2000s, when the US supersedes it. In 1993, 390 Leclerc Tanks, 28 Leclerc DNG ARV and 18 Leclerc were ordered by the UAE, and deliveries ended in 2010 from France. One hundred anti-ship missiles valued at \$290m was transferred to the UAE from France from 1995 to 1997. The US refusal of selling F-16 jets to the UAE in 1998 made it opt for 62 FGA Mirage-2000 fighter jets in a \$3.4 billion deal. In another \$27m contract, 14 light helicopters were ordered and delivered in 2002.⁵⁷⁹

In this same decade (i.e., 1990's), as UAE diversifies its arms sources, Russia came to the limelight of UAEs arms transfers. Russian arms transfer to the UAE in the 1990s was \$1.03bn, and that accounts for 22.39% of total arms transferred to the UAE in that decade (see table 9). Russia has transferred 2500 9M117 Bastion/At-10 Anti-tank missiles to the UAE in that decade.⁵⁸⁰

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⁵⁷⁸ SIPRI, "Trade-Register-1990-2010," n.d.

⁵⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁰ *ibid.*

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The UAE has spent a lot on the military for it to be able to counter the threat from Iranian missiles. In particular, in the early 2000s, the UAE opted for missile defence systems that may warn for intercepting high, medium, and low altitude ballistic missiles.⁵⁸² In 2009, the UAE decided that it needs the Theatre High Altitude Air Defence system for high-altitude missile interception. It also opted for advanced patriotic PAC-3 missiles with advanced radars for a low-to-mid-altitude interception.

In this same decade (i.e., 1990's), as UAE diversifies its arms sources, Russia came to the limelight of UAEs arms transfers. Russian arms transfer to the UAE in the 1990s was \$1.32bn, and that accounts for 22.39% of total arms transferred to the UAE in that decade (see table 7 above). Russia has transferred 2500 9M117 Bastion/At-10 Anti-tank missiles to the UAE in that decade.⁵⁸³

France has been the major arms exporter to the UAE, but since the 2000s, the US superseded France due to its mutual threat perception of Iran with the UAE and the US long-term strategic goal in the region. Between 2001 and 2010, arms transfer from the US to UAE stands at \$4.4 billion, which is 47.18 of UAEs arms import in that decade if expressed in percentage, while France that became second, accounted for 43.85 per cent.

2. External Balancing Strategies

a. Regional Alignment During the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War

To balance its threat perception of Iran and Iraq, the UAE joined Saudi Arabia through the GCC. Although UAE professed neutrality during the war, through the GCC, it supported Saddam during the war.⁵⁸⁴ Moreover, the need for the free flow of ships to

⁵⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁵⁸² Gervais, "*Shielding the State: UAE Military Efforts to Counter Iran's Disruptive Options in the Gulf*", p. 22.

⁵⁸³ SIPRI, "Trade-Register-1990-2010."

⁵⁸⁴ Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War," 2011, p. 15.

the Gulf pushed UAE to deepen its cooperation with the US Navy.⁵⁸⁵ Thus, while working with Saudi Arabia to balance Iran and Iraq, the UAE used the US to balance Saudi power under the traditional US military shield in the GCC.⁵⁸⁶

Despite its declared official neutrality, the UAE (emirates of Abu Dhabi particularly) aided Saddam Hussein in billions of dollars during the Iran-Iraq War. This balancing strategy aligns with Walt's argument that if potential allies of a state are approximately equal in strength, then threatened states conclude an alliance with the least dangerous side.⁵⁸⁷ Iraq seems to be the least dangerous state here, and as a result, it is said that the UAEs contribution to Iraq during the war was around 2 to 4 billion USD.⁵⁸⁸ However, when Iran was making an advance towards Iraq in the war in 1983, the UAE and the rest of the small Gulf states open pro-Iraq stance waned. This is in line with Walt's argument that in wartime, and particularly as soon as a result is positive, some countries will continue bandwagon with the winning side to hand out the reward of conquest. Yet, the restoration of peace stimulates balancing behaviour once more.⁵⁸⁹ As the fighting continues, the UAE agrees that mediation is the only best way to end the crisis. Yet, the UAE continued to be loyal to Iraq within the GCC.⁵⁹⁰

Along this line, the UAE launched an attempt to seek a diplomatic solution to the war, particularly after the internationalisation of the war when America reflagged Kuwait tankers in 1987. In December 1987, though the GCC, the United Arab Emirates served to mediate due to its "neutrality" and the positive relationship with Iran. Nevertheless, the Emirates has violated the sanctions imposed by the U.S. through the 1979-1981 hostage crisis by the transfer of American products to Iran. Shortly after Saudi Arabian Iranian ties broke in 1988, the United Arab Emirates President Zayd ibn Sultan Al-Nahyan announced that the United Arab Emirates has strong relations with Iran.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ Emma Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 126, doi:10.4324/9781315619576.

⁵⁸⁷ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 264.

⁵⁸⁸ Nonneman, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities," p. 178.

⁵⁸⁹ *ibid.* p. 31.

⁵⁹⁰ *ibid.* p. 178.

⁵⁹¹ Rubin, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War," p. 127.

While the UAE supported Iraq when it was at war with Iran, the change in threat perception of the regime following Saddam's aggression on Kuwait, therefore, the UAE supported Riyadh and the international community to liberate Kuwait. During the Gulf War in 1991, the US received \$6,572 billion in UAE aid and allowed the US to use its airbases and ports, which is the only one deep enough to harbour US aircraft carrier in the Gulf.⁵⁹² In addition, over 250 fighter jets of the coalition forces were hosted in the UAE during the war. Abu Dhabi has contributed its forces and some of its Mirage 2000 and Mirage 5. Moreover, it has contributed to the war course's financial support to the tune of \$6 billion.⁵⁹³

b. The UAE and Extra-regional Alliance

The UAE joined the GCC, created to respond to shocks of the Islamic revolution and the eight-year war that ensued. It believed that bandwagoning with the Saudis to guarantee its security was the best thing. However, with Saddam's aggression in Kuwait, Abu Dhabi discovered that neither Saudi Arabia nor the GCC could defend itself not to talk of other states. As a result, the UAE has reassessed and adjusted its policy, combining varying forms of bandwagoning and balancing strategies at a different level.⁵⁹⁴

The UAE abandoned its erstwhile idea of opposition to external participation in regional affairs. It was also the same reason with the potential threat from Iran that led the UAE, and other GCC member countries signed defence agreements with the US and as a result, some advanced weapons system has been transferred.⁵⁹⁵ Moreover, the threat Abu Dhabi perceived from Iraq's aggression towards Kuwait led to the expansion of defence ties with the United States, culminating in a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 1994.⁵⁹⁶ The DCA envisaged the establishment of a military base by Washington in Abu Dhabi.

⁵⁹² Sean Foley, "The UAE: Political Issues and Security Dilemmas," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1999), pp. 25–45, <https://www.badrinvestments.com/wp-content/uploads/1999/03/DA-UAE-Political-issues-and-security-dilemmas-March-1999.pdf>.

⁵⁹³ Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War," 2011, p. 15.

⁵⁹⁴ Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," p. 126.

⁵⁹⁵ Richard F. Grimmett, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1990-1997," 1998, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/transfers90-97.pdf>, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁹⁶ Kenneth Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy," (01/21/2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

Consequently, the Dubai port of Jebel Ali became a particularly important port for US Navy ships in the Gulf afterwards the US Fifth Fleet was restarted in 1995 and was probably the most frequently used location for US warships from outside the United States.⁵⁹⁷ Following the DCA signing, a status of force agreement that gave the US army personnel to be deployed some legal immunity was signed.⁵⁹⁸ As a result, the UAE military began working with their American counterpart, most often with at least half a dozen joint deployments in the past 25 years. Currently, it is only in the US invasion of Iraq that the United Arab Emirates did not participate.⁵⁹⁹

During Operation Desert Storm, the United Arab Emirates provided logistical support of about \$6 billion⁶⁰⁰ while responding to the US Secretary of State's visit, James Baker to garner backing for the liberation of Kuwait.⁶⁰¹ In addition, the United Arab Emirates participated militarily in the US's multilateral operation to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. Moreover, it signed many defence cooperation agreements with the US, in which the Gulf States serve as essential logistics, command and controls centres for the US in the Gulf. Along with the Clinton presidency, which followed a dual containment policy for both Iran and Iraq, the GCC and its integration into the US defence umbrella, Iran, during Rafsanjani's period, sought to expand diplomatic relations with the other Gulf states. For Iran, the indispensability of any security structure in the Gulf was that foreign forces stayed clear of the area.⁶⁰²

Aligning with the US can be seen as a way of balancing the threat from Iraq or Iran and balancing Saudi Arabia's overbearing influence on the small states of the Gulf. As Joseph Kostiner noted, "some of the smaller GCC states have even identified Saudi Arabia as a threat because of its size and increasing assertiveness within the GCC".⁶⁰³ Therefore, their patron relationship with the US "allows them (if they want it) a bit of room to manoeuvre within the Saudi orbit".⁶⁰⁴ Nevertheless, by signing arms agreements

⁵⁹⁷ *ibid.* p.218.

⁵⁹⁸ Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy."

⁵⁹⁹ Ulrichsen, "Iran-UAE Relations," p. 219.

⁶⁰⁰ Sadjadpour, "The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War," 2011.

⁶⁰¹ Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations," pp. 167–88.

⁶⁰² Ulrichsen, "Iran-UAE Relations," p. 218.

⁶⁰³ Joseph Kostiner, "Perceptions of Collective Security in the Post-Saddam Era," *International Politics of the Gulf*, ed. by Mehran Kamrava, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011, pp. 94–119.

⁶⁰⁴ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Gulf, The International Relations of the Gulf*, 2010.

for the U.S., the UAE stands to prevent further deterioration of the balance of power in the Middle East due to the collapse of the balance that hitherto existed.⁶⁰⁵

The UAE has allowed the US to station its troops in naval and air bases in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. The United States established naval bases in the UAE (Al Dhafra Air, Jebel Ali, and Fujairah) ports,⁶⁰⁶ for logistical support purposes, under a military agreement between the two countries in 1994.

Although Iran moves toward a moderate and cautious engagement when dealing with the UAE during the periods of Rafsanjani and Khatami, there is an increase in arms expenditure following the DCA and SOFA agreement. In fact, in that decade, UAE ranked first in the Third World in terms of arms transfer.⁶⁰⁷ It is worth mentioning that the DCA did not immediately make the US main arms importer to the UAE as France still maintained its first position in the period between 1990 to 1999.

The UAE started a nuclear programme in late 2009 following a \$20-billion deal to develop four nuclear reactors by a South Korean company to be ready by 2020. Often, this is viewed as a result of a growing anti-Iranian stance may be the obvious nuclearization of the UAE. However, despite the diminishing hydrocarbon reserves and the growing domestic energy demand, how the policy was implemented was, aimed at signalling alerts to Iran.⁶⁰⁸

II. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF THE UAE SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

⁶⁰⁵ Ferhat Pirinççi, "ABD-Suudi Arabistan Silah Anlaşması," *Akademik Orta Doğu*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2011) p.66.

⁶⁰⁶ Wallin, "U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East," 2018.

⁶⁰⁷ Grimmett, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1990-1997." p. 10.

⁶⁰⁸ Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 173.

A. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

1. Perception of Internal Vulnerabilities by the UAE

a. *The MB and Political Islam*

Internally, political Islam and groups linked to MB are perceived by the regime as a primary source of threat to its stability. The main targets of government crackdown were individuals associated with Al-Islah, an Emirati Islamist group allegedly affiliated with the MB in Egypt, giving impetus to Islamists in the Gulf.⁶⁰⁹ In the eyes of the Gulf monarchies, Islamist groups are a threat to their legitimacy since, among other reasons, they consider the current monarchical government to be not genuinely Islamic. Al-Islah, as Mazhar al-Zo'by and Birol Başkan and averred, “*generates oppositional discursive activism that contests the state's claim of legitimate and moral power [to the extent of igniting] the most challenging and systematic public contention to state legitimacy since the country's inception in 1971.*”⁶¹⁰

Indeed, al-Islah has been calling for far-reaching reforms while criticizing the government to the extent that it was argued that the UAE threat perception of MB is similar to the threat it perceives from Iran.⁶¹¹ Abu Dhabi sees the MB as “*an organization which encroaches upon the sovereignty and integrity of nations.*” Given that the UAE has no formal religious framework to defend its religious values, competing rhetoric from al-Islah proves strong.⁶¹² Moreover, the nature of the threat is that of internal but with an international dimension. For that reason, the UAE designated the MB a terrorist group and banned al-Islah from political activities.⁶¹³

To better grasp the regime's threat perception of political Islam, it will be of benefit to drive through the terrain of its political system and how the regime derives its legitimacy. The UAE is a federation with a secular system with a clear separation of religion from governmental affairs. According to Robert Mason, the UAE's secularism

⁶⁰⁹ Ingo Forstenlechner, Emilie Rutledge, Rashed Salem Alnuaimi, “The UAE, The ‘Arab Spring’ And Different Types of Dissent,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. XIX, no. 4 (2012), p. 55.

⁶¹⁰ Mazhar al-Zo'by, Birol Başkan, “Discourse and Oppositionality in the Arab Spring: The Case of the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE,” *International Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2015), pp. 401–17, doi:10.1177/0268580914554664.

⁶¹¹ Eman Ragab, “Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring,” *International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2017), pp. 40–41, doi:10.1080/03932729.2017.1309101.

⁶¹² David B. Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 71, no. 4 (2017), p. 555, doi:10.3751/71.4.12.

⁶¹³ Rania El Gamal, “UAE Lists Muslim Brotherhood as Terrorist Group,” *Reuters*, 11/15/2014.

“draws in external support since secularism is considered essential by some western observers in keeping an extremist model from dominating in the Middle East.”⁶¹⁴

In terms of legitimacy, the UAE derives it from tribal leaders who have their roots in the British protectorate. Having demonstrated good leadership and patronage networks, these tribal leaders and their monarchical rule are accepted as legitimate by the population to be controlling the affairs of the seven federating units that form the UAE. As Jamal Khashoggi succinctly noted, “*In the Gulf, a monarchy’s covenant is between a population and a royal family. The population was never promised the right to vote or even to name ministers.*”⁶¹⁵ The ideology of the Muslim brotherhood, al-Islah and other groups that engage in political Islam by extension clashed with secularism, co-option, tribal dominance, to mention a few. The Islamists are opposed to the secular structure of the UAE and are seeking to make the government more Islamic. However, the advent of the MB was deemed by the UAE an imminent threat to its secular system.⁶¹⁶

It is noteworthy that the threat perception of political Islam is not perceived similarly in the UAE’s federating units (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Fujairah, Umm al-Quwain, and Ajman). Each federation member is an absolute monarchy and retains considerable autonomy, and many times pursue a diverse interest.⁶¹⁷ Although the Emirates’ foreign and security policies have always dominated Abu Dhabi, the other Emirates are divided over MB, which is seen in the manner in which they address al-Islah. The difference in the ideological viewpoint and priorities of the leaders of the emirates that form the UAE, which manifests in their varied threat perception of the Islah and political Islam in general, makes the Emirate more susceptible to the dangers Islamists may face pose to the stability of the regime.

⁶¹⁴ Robert Mason, “Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2018), pp. 95–112, doi:10.1080/11926422.2018.1427123.

⁶¹⁵ Jamal Khashoggi, “The Saudi King Never Promised Democracy,” *NYTimes*, 2012.

⁶¹⁶ Dania Koleilat Khatib, “Arab Gulf States’ Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings,” *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities*, ed. by Dania Koleilat Khatib, Marwa Maziad, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p. 30, doi:10.4324/9780429505300.

⁶¹⁷ “United Arab Emirates: Country Profile,” 2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/staff/hr/Country-Profile-United-Arab-Emirates.pdf>, p. 81; Julius Dihstelhoff, Alexander Lohse, “Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the ‘Arab Spring,’” *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*, ed. by Philipp O Amour, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, p. 43.

For example, upon its creation in Dubai in 1974, with the help of members of the Muslim Brotherhood of the neighbouring countries in the Gulf and beyond, Al-Islah quickly gained followers and secured the elite's protection in the emirates of Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. With the emirates' support, A-Islah leaders have held various ministerial posts in the emirate. Simultaneously, the number of members increased and the Ministry of Justice and Education became dominated by Al-Islah. Although Abu Dhabi leaders have been oppressing al-Islah from the beginning of the 1990s, the Sharjah leaders backed al-Islah more and rejected Abu Dhabi's actions against the MB.⁶¹⁸ When the reach of Al-Islah increased, its ability to manipulate society by petitioning the Abu Dhabi government also increased.⁶¹⁹ Al-Islah and other Islamists are critical of several government policies, particularly reforms in the educational system and the UAE's alliance with the USA.⁶²⁰

Since the UAE's independence in 1971, Abu Dhabi emirates aim was to dominate every aspect of the emirates thanks to its riches from crude oil exports. For this reason, Abu Dhabi sees any group with broad societal followership as a challenge to its goal of controlling the other emirates effectively. Al-Islah's thickened enlargement in the UAE, therefore, posed a threat to the Abu Dhabi rulers. In Dubai, the ruling family also see the Al-Islah as a threat given that Dubai "had long been a progressive, commercially orientated entrepôt that did not want Islah agitating against what it described as "un-Islamic practices," like serving alcohol in hotels."⁶²¹

Moreover, Al-Islah and other Islamist movements mainly consist of a threat to the Emirati government's religious credentials, which preserve Islamic values as one of its pillars of legitimation. In the late 1970s, for the UAE to accentuate its Islamic credentials against the Shia zealots, it worked with al-Islah. It approved punitive measures in line with al-Islah for drinking alcohol in some emirates. However, the tacit support al-Islah got from Abu Dhabi did not continue as the fervour of the revolution waned through the 1980s.⁶²² Instead, the emirates of Abu Dhabi promoted Sufism as an alternative to Al-

⁶¹⁸ *ibid.*

⁶¹⁹ David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 71, no. 4 (2017), p. 552, doi:10.3751/71.4.12.

⁶²⁰ Fatma Al Sayegh, "Post-9/11 Changes in the Gulf: The Case of the UAE," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2004), pp. 119–120.

⁶²¹ Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring," p. 552.

⁶²² *ibid.* p. 553.

Islah's version of political Islam. At the same time, Dubai has vetted Friday sermon and warned imams to stay away from extending their influence in the political domain. Abu Dhabi also clampdown on members of the al-Islah by forcing them to leave the posts they held in government offices. In the mid-1990, when MB collaborated with some members of al-Islah allegedly attempted to assassinate the Egyptian president, Abu Dhabi further suppressed the group and deported foreigners linked to the MB. Yet, the regime failed in taking more actions against the group because of the support they have from sheikh Saqr al-Qasimi, the emir of Ras al-Khaimah. David Robert argued that al-Islah hid under the cover of Sheikh al-Qasimi to maintain its influence across the emirates.⁶²³

The 9/11 incident compounded Abu Dhabi's distrust of Islamist groups and politicization of Islam into what was rapidly turned into the continued strategy of unwieldy resistance. Abu Dhabi is not focused on discriminating between more and less militant extremist Islamists or between violent groups and those who advocate political Islam aspects, contrary to Saudi Arabia.⁶²⁴ Abu Dhabi was cautious not to undermine its main strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia from its distinct viewpoint on religion's role in political affairs. However, the regime is aware of the inherent danger of political Islamists and their role in politics, including inciting rebellion in domestic affairs, regional instability and widespread terror.⁶²⁵ Indeed, in a leaked diplomatic cable of the UAE, Muhammed Bin Zayed, and now the defector leader of the emirate and the federation by extension, noted that says that his country has up to 700 MB of members and the security services have established between 50 and 60 emirates MB in the military. Moreover, he noted that between 50% and 80% of the UAE's military "would respond to the call of 'some holy man in Mekkah.'" He also believes that he would be "'stoned' by his own citizens if he pushed some subjects too openly."⁶²⁶

While the meaning of Sheik Saqr's demise is just retrospectively apparent, the reality that only around three months before the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, the move to disband al-Islah has decisively been eliminated from the scene. In 2010, information was also gathered that Al-Islah's representatives attempted to break out of

⁶²³ *ibid.*

⁶²⁴ Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy," 2017, p. 16. www.agsiw.org.

⁶²⁵ *ibid.*

⁶²⁶ David D. Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't M.B.S. It's M.B.Z.," *The New York Times*, 2019.

their base in Ras al-Khaimah to set the stage for a nationwide movement across the state. To get through to a larger population, from Ras al-Khaimah, the Islah sought to organize activities for its members and apologists in the rest of the Emirates. At about the same time, Al-Islah started to participate in requests for political reform and mobilised to broaden the democratic opening in 2006. Many representatives therefore engaged extensively in drafting a petition sent in March 2011 to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed. The two articles in the petition, endorsed by 133 Emirates, including several members of Al-Islah, requested the Federal National Council (FNC) appointment, the UAE's legislative and consultative body, and the authority to be given powers for regulation and oversight.⁶²⁷

With the Arab Uprisings, and by challenging the religious narrative presented by royal families, Islamists can weaken the legitimacy of monarchical government. Furthermore, in a hypothetical scenario, they could offer a government alternative based on this legitimization strategy, threatening the monarchy's continuity. This is added to the Islamists' alleged loyalty to a foreign organization (the Muslim Brotherhood) and gives a complete picture of the regime's concern for this group. In short, Islamists not only question legitimacy based on the regime's religious values, but they would also have the potential to offer a legitimate alternative to non-monarchical government. Abu Dhabi's regime perceived the MB in Egypt as a transnational threat as it rose to fame in Cairo. Because the leaders are apprehensive that the Egyptian MB could influence Al-Islah, they took a tough stance toward the MB and the Islah since 2012.⁶²⁸ Doha's funding in Egypt heightened the MB-led government's fear as it became the most important provider of aid to the Mursi government.⁶²⁹

Another important dimension to understanding the Emirati Arab Spring is the growing inequality between the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai in relation to the poorest emirates, located in the north of the country - in particular Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah and Umm al-Quwain - where socioeconomic conditions are much lower than

⁶²⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Perceptions and Divisions in Security and Defense Structures in Arab Gulf States," *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of A Crisis*, ed. by Andreas Krieg, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp. 19–36.

⁶²⁸ Courtney Freer, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the Emirates: Anatomy of a Crackdown," *Middle East Eye*, 2015.

⁶²⁹ Imad K. Harb, "An Economic Explanation for Egypt's Alignment in the GCC Crisis," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 2017.

those of other emirates.⁶³⁰ With the increase in inequality, resentment in the northern emirates towards Abu Dhabi, Dubai and the central government would rise. Al-Islah would be particularly strong in the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, where a member of the royal family was detained in his palace on charges of being one of the leaders of the movement in the country.⁶³¹

Nevertheless, after requesting via a petition in March 2011 the UAE president to grant the Federal National Council more legislative powers, the liberals appeared to lose strength because of insufficient support of the masses. When the Arab Spring made a much more brutal turnaround culminating into the Syrian crisis, MB often asked for outside assistance.⁶³² However, it was believed that MB had the opportunity to disrupt social stability and cohesion and challenged improvements in societal development.

b. Dissents from Liberal Reformers

In the UAE, some people demanded liberal reforms by demanding greater federal changes instead of revolution. Specifically, political activists and intellectual representatives appealed for enhanced voting rights to directly elect representatives the FNC of which clans, economic circles and academics have their leaders. Moreover, they called for more legislative authority to be granted to the FNC along with an amendment of the Constitution to expand the Federal Tax Service's obligations. The government reacted, and some signatories have been detained while the government has monitored the organisations.⁶³³

The continuing abuse also of reformist conditions revealed that UAE leaders are vulnerable to even the slightest disagreement. The number of political activists in the Emirates remains limited. Ideologically, the groups are split into vast numbers of expatriate non-citizens, facing the public dissatisfied with their minority status. The

⁶³⁰ Ulrichsen, "Small States with a Big Role : Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring," p. 29.

⁶³¹ Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "UAE Security Crackdown: A View From The Emirates," *Al-Monitor*, 2012; Ulrichsen, "Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring," p. 17.

⁶³² Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations," pp. 167–88.

⁶³³ Coates Ulrichsen, "Perceptions and Divisions in Security and Defense Structures in Arab Gulf States," p. 29.

Emirates' commitment to the GCC Peninsula Shield forces in the rebellion in Bahrain suggests that the United Arab States is receptive to such demands.⁶³⁴

The most publicized measure taken by the population was creating a petition, signed by 133 Emiratis in March 2011, demanding that the FNC acquire a legislative function in opposition to its current consultative status and offer greater accountability. These demands, even if modest, were not well received by the government, which responded with the arrest of five reformist activists accused of publicly insulting Emirati rulers.⁶³⁵ The five individuals were detained for eight months before being sentenced.

The chain of events exposed above reveals an incomplete demand legitimization cycle. On the part of the activists and the petition's signers, there was a demand for legitimation based on political reforms, even if timid. The government responded through repression; therefore, it chose not to legitimize itself based on this demand. On the other hand, through presidential pardon, the Emirati leadership sought to project a benevolent image around Sheikh Khalifa Al-Nahyan, a father who forgives his children's mistakes and deviations.⁶³⁶ In this sense, there was also an attempt at charismatic legitimation by the regime. The imprisonment of the UAE-5 marked the beginning of a wave of arrests and other restrictive and repressive measures unprecedented in the country, aimed at removing any sign of political dissent in society.

2. External Threat Perceptions

a. Iran

The UAEs threat perception of Iran is not similar to that perceived by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Although only the UAE has a territorial dispute with Iran, its internal politics and its leader's perception of threat differ from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Abu Dhabi's policies in Yemen indicated that the suppression of al-Islah was more crucial for the UAE than completely collaborating with Saudi Arabia against the Houthis.⁶³⁷ As stated earlier, the UAE is a federation of 7 emirates, each with its ruler who has absolute

⁶³⁴ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," pp. 313–40.

⁶³⁵ *ibid.* p. 58-9.

⁶³⁶ Ulrichsen, "Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring," p. 2.

⁶³⁷ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'"

power. This composition affects the state's policy in general as each of the federating units perceived the threat of Iran asymmetrically. To exemplify this, Dubai sees Iran as a good business partner while Abu Dhabi and Ras al-Khaimah sees Iran as a real threat. However, with the bailout of Dubai following the financial crisis in 2008, Abu Dhabi's perspective has always prevailed, especially in the realm of foreign and security policies. Given that Abu Dhabi is the wealthiest of the federating emirates and the bailout of Dubai that had contested Abu Dhabi's credentials of leading the emirates in the past, it may be argued that the UAE foreign and security policy can be treated as uniform but to some extent.

In the UAE, a smaller, economically integrated Shiite community with close links to Iran can be a fifth column against the government. However, as opposed to Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, there is no internal component to the threat perception of Iran. Iran's arbitrary posture over the three contested islands, its venture on armaments, ballistic missile capabilities, nuclear ambition coupled with its provocative manoeuvres in the contested territorial UAE waters is a significant cause for concern.⁶³⁸ Moreover, the UAE is concerned about the rise of Shiite militia groups in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.⁶³⁹ The Arab Uprising has undoubtedly given Iran a chance to continue with its agenda of subverting the Arab Gulf states to gain more influence.

While Iran continued to cling to the disputed islands, the UAE has treated the issue with care. Through touring the disputed territories in 2012, towards the end of his tenure as the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had stirred up fears in the UAE. It was the first time a sitting President of Iran stepped his foot on the contested territory, which showed that time had not tempered with Iran's stance on the island issue. Notwithstanding the expectations for policy changes when Hassan Rouhani became the president of Iran in August 2013, Tehran's position remained the same. Indeed, when Javad Zarif spoke of dialogue with the UAE regarding the Island issues in 2013, a general in the IRGC was quick in repudiated what Zarif said as he averred that the islands are "a matter of national security and not open for negotiation."⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁸ Yoel Guzansky, Yiftah S Shapir, "Iran Goes Ballistic," (02/08/2019).

⁶³⁹ Jon B. Alteman, "Iraq and the Gulf States: The Balance of Fear," 2007, www.usip.org. p.10

⁶⁴⁰ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," *"The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring"*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 93.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, the UAE also considers Iran with a nuclear weapon as a threat. Iran will eventually strive to assert its position internationally at both the economic and political stage, thus placing it in economic rivalry with the foreign undertakings of the UAE.⁶⁴¹ For example, Tehran's investments in Dubai proved to be an opportunity and a risk for the UAE in the case of Iran with nuclear weapons. Whereas the economic linkage between Dubai and Tehran may alleviate the Iranian bellicose stance against the UAE, it could provide an opportunity for Iran to divide the UAE in diplomatic terms.⁶⁴² It is noteworthy that Dubai has been historically the most accommodating to Iran, notably in the Iran-Iraq war.

Although the UAE has demonstrated its support for the JCPOA nuclear agreement, it remained one of the prominent critics of the deal. It did not agree with the claims that the nuclear agreement would contribute to regional unity. The UAE sees the agreement as over-willed to open up to Iran by the signatories. Thus, Anwar Gargash, while responding to the EU's Federica Mogherini article on integrating Tehran in the Gulf security framework, noted that what was published "lacks context and understanding of Iran's regional and aggressive policy and sectarian overtones that have polarized the Middle East."⁶⁴³ Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, the Foreign minister of the UAE, noted that "*Iran is not carrying out this activity only in Yemen, it is conducting the same activity in Lebanon, in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and in Pakistan... Someone might say that the information provided by Yemen is not accurate, but there is systematic action that has been going for years on the idea of exporting the (Iranian) revolution.*"⁶⁴⁴ He afterwards delivered a formal rejection of Iran's role in the Gulf at the United Nations General Assembly, emphasizing that the UAE is against any effort by Iran to interfere in the domestic realm of Arab States.⁶⁴⁵ Therefore, the UAE has been pressing the US for a military solution to Iran nuclear. The UAE ambassador to the United States supports the use of the military to end Iran's nuclear program if sanctions failed. For him, the long-term advantages of destroying Iran's nuclear facilities outweigh the short-term regional

⁶⁴¹ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Frederic M Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2007), pp. 111–28, doi:10.1080/00396330701437777.

⁶⁴² *ibid.*

⁶⁴³ William Maclean, "Gulf Arab Power UAE Chides EU over Opening to Iran," *Reuters*, 07/29/2015,

⁶⁴⁴ Sami Aboudi, "UAE Says Sees Systematic Iranian Meddling in Yemen, Region," *Reuters*, 04/08/2015,

⁶⁴⁵ Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, "The General Debate of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations*, 10/02/2015,.

backlash.⁶⁴⁶ But the US prefers sanctions and requested strict compliance of the UAE to the sanctions.⁶⁴⁷

More recently, when the US announced withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, the UAE, through its minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, tweeted, *“Iran interpreted the JCPOA as concurrence of its regional hegemony. An aggressive Iran was emboldened as a result & its ballistic missile program became both offensive & exportable.”*⁶⁴⁸

b. Qatar

Although Saudi Arabia and Bahrain view Qatar’s friendly ties with Tehran as threatening, Doha’s compassionate handling of and supporting Islamists has mainly threatened the UAE. Qatar has been a haven for many Islamists that exiled from many Arab countries. Moreover, Islamists have obtained a public platform with the news channel Aljazeera, established in 1996 and soon became the most influential media in the Middle East. Because the regimes in the Gulf are not accustomed to media scrutiny, they regularly opposed the programs aired by Aljazeera.

Before the Arab Uprisings, Qatar’s actions were not perceived as containing a security threat by the UAE. But the UAE started to regard Qatar’s actions as a threat since the Arab Uprisings, which is connected to the UAE’s mistrust of the MB. Qatar’s backing of the MB and Islamist across the region has challenged the stability of the UAE. Furthermore, since the onset of the Arab Uprisings, Qatar has worked with MB and its affiliates across the middle east, as exemplified in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria.

Reporting by Aljazeera, which gradually leaned towards Islamists, was indicative of the focus of Qatari diplomacy.⁶⁴⁹ In its discourse, Aljazeera did not stick to the norms of media discourse in the Gulf and the rest of the Arab world. It is committed to increasing the amount of free speech, which in turn offends the UAE and the rest of the Arab regimes

⁶⁴⁶ Lake, “U.A.E. Diplomat Mulls Hit on Iran’s Nukes.”

⁶⁴⁷ Sadjadpour, “The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War,” 2011.

⁶⁴⁸ Anwar Gargash, “أنور قرقاش” on Twitter: ‘Iran Interpreted the JCPOA as Concurrence of Its Regional Hegemony. An Aggressive Iran Was Emboldened as a Result & Its Ballistic Missile Program Became Both Offensive & Exportable.’, *Twitter*, 05/08/2018, <https://twitter.com/anwargargash/status/993938601066090496>.

⁶⁴⁹ Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

in the Gulf and the Middle East. Aljazeera's motto "One View...and the Opposing View" is counter to the dominant media paradigm. It created a forum for opposition leaders, who were continuously harassed and alienated, including Islamist groups, whose repression was supported by both the Arab regimes and the West.⁶⁵⁰

The policy of Qatar's support for the MB has been equally perceived a threatening the UAEs security.⁶⁵¹ This is one reason for the UAE, and Saudi Arabia campaign on delegitimization and reduction of MB was launched in Qatar. The strength of their determination manifested in their tough stance, including recalling of their ambassadors from Qatar and the threat of blockade. Their demands were for Qatar to stop supporting Egyptian militants in hostilities but also demanded an end to the support of MB in the Gulf region per the agreement signed by the GCC interior ministers in 2013.⁶⁵²

Apart from the threat posed to the UAE by the rise of MB in Egypt, an economic controversy also emerged. The Mursi government's initiative to set up a new economic zone and draw investors from Turkey and Qatar in the Suez would have made the project the biggest container port and free trade zone. The project would have diminished Jebel Ali port's significance, which is one of the key region's ports. However, following the coup against Mursi, the Egyptian military assumed control of the project and granted the UAE its implementation contract.⁶⁵³

As of 2011, Doha along with Ankara has been the largest sponsor of the MB in the Middle East and has been following aggressive regional policy notwithstanding its limits of size and military. The coalition between Qatar and the other Gulf monarchs in the form of the GCC and Washington has not stopped it from establishing friendly ties with Iran. Qatar's path of independent foreign policy prompted a dispute between Doha

⁶⁵⁰ Mongi Mabrouki, "Al Jazeera and the Arab Spring: What Role and What Impact?" *Mapping the Aljazeera Phenomenon Twenty Years On.*, ed. by Ezzeddine Abdelmoula, Nouredine Miladi, Aljazeera Centre for Studies, 2016.

⁶⁵¹ Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring". p.40.

⁶⁵² Frank Gardner, "Gulf Ambassadors Pulled from Qatar over 'Interference,'" *BBC News*, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26447914>.

⁶⁵³ Julius Dihstelhoff, Alexander Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring,'" p. 46-7, *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*, ed. by Philipp O Amour, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

and the Arab Quartet, which culminated in Qatar's air, land and naval blockade by the countries.⁶⁵⁴

The release of Qatari hostages in Iraq in April 2017 established the catalyst for the worsening of the dispute. The release of the Qatari members of the royal family came with the payment of millions of dollars in ransom to Kataib Hezbollah as well as to the Nusra Front, that have both been labelled as terrorist by the UAE since 2014.⁶⁵⁵ The ransom paid to the labelled terrorist according to the UAE presented further proof of Qatar's funding for terrorism.

The internationally recognized Government of the National Accord (GNA), which has an Islamist orientation, has been assisted by Qatar and Turkey, which later established a three-way coordination centre for military training and cooperation with the GNA in Misrata to defend the government of Fayeze al-Sarraj.⁶⁵⁶ Prior to this, Turkey and Libya reached a military cooperation deal with the GNA in December 2019. Upon meeting with the Prime minister of Libya, the Turkish President stressed that *"We will speed up the process between Turkey and Libya. We told them that we are always ready to help if they need it. From military and security cooperation, to steps taken regarding our maritime rights – we are ready."*⁶⁵⁷

Since then, Turkey has sent its assistance to the GNA which comes in the form of drones, military officers and armoured vehicles to support the government in its war against the Libyan National Army (LNA) that had since launched an offensive in April 2019 to topple the internationally recognized government in Tripoli.⁶⁵⁸ This has clashed with the interest of the UAE that has been supporting groups opposing Islamist in Libya, such as the LNA led by warlord Khalifa Haftar that has been striving to topple the GNA.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁴ Ramazan Turgut, "5 Arab Countries Sever Diplomatic Ties with Qatar," *Anadolu Agency*, 05/06/2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/5-arab-countries-sever-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar/834521>.

⁶⁵⁵ Robert F. Worth, "Kidnapped Royalty Become Pawns in Iran's Deadly Plot," *The New York Times*, 03/14/2018; "List of Groups Designated Terrorist Organisations by the UAE," *The National*, 2014.

⁶⁵⁶ Ragip Soylu, "In Libya, Turkey and Qatar Deepen Their Footprint amid Deadlock in Negotiations," *Middle East Eye*, 08/20/2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-turkey-qatar-military-deal-haftar-gna>.

⁶⁵⁷ Reuters, "Erdogan Says Turkey to Boost Cooperation with Libya - NTV," *Reuters*, 12/18/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-libya-erdogan-idAFL8N28S2HB>.

⁶⁵⁸ Soylu, "In Libya, Turkey and Qatar Deepen Their Footprint amid Deadlock in Negotiations."

⁶⁵⁹ Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, "Why UAE Seeks to Crush Libya's Democratic Transition," *Anadolu Agency*, 03/30/2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-why-uae-seeks-to-crush-libya-s-democratic-transition/1784855>.

It was also clear in East Africa that Qatar was not prepared to respond to neighbours' requests. In 2018, Qatar used the Somali government-UAE crisis to improve ties with Mogadishu. The UAE military started preparing Somali security services to combat Ash Shabab terrorists in 2015. However, in 2017 a dispute between Somalia and the UAE ensued as a result of UAE's establishment of a base in Berbera and planned training for the police and military in the quasi-independent Somaliland, which is legally part of Somalia.⁶⁶⁰ The protests against UAE's move by Mogadishu led the UAE to react by ending the military training mission it started with Somali forces. Since then, the UAE has cantered its assistance to the autonomous of Somaliland and Puntland, where DP World at Bosaso port has been operating since 2017. As a result, Somalia was quick to embrace Qatar with its aid.⁶⁶¹

c. *ISIS*

Anything that has to do with active political Islam is considered extremism and a threat to the UAE. The regime believes that extremism of any kind spurs terrorism, and terrorism is a monster that knows no boundary. Being averse to terrorism pushed the UAE to classify groups that have not carried arms against the state as terrorists. The foreign minister of the UAE, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan noted that "For many countries, the definition of terror is that you have to carry a weapon and terrorise people. For us, it is far beyond that. We cannot tolerate even the smallest and tiniest amount of terrorism."⁶⁶²

Although the threat from ISIS and other radical groups is perceived as an existential threat by the regime, it is not considered an immediate threat to the regime. As Anwar Gargash noted, "ISIS is a long-term threat, nobody is immune."⁶⁶³ In the same vein, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan suggested that "They [ISIS] don't like our Islam. They would like to force their interpretation of Islam on our values, on our

⁶⁶⁰ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁶⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶⁶² Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, "United Arab Emirates' Foreign Minister on ISIS, Iran," Fox News, 11/21/2014, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/3904305695001/>.

⁶⁶³ Anwar Gargash, "UAE Warns India: 'You're Not Immune to ISIS,'" NDTV, 02/08/2016, <https://www.ndtv.com/video/exclusive/left-right-centre/uae-warns-india-you-re-not-immune-to-isis-402849>.

countries, on our families.”⁶⁶⁴ Moreover, ISIS constitute what the UAE perceives as threatening because it has called for the fall of the regimes in the Gulf and has called for the establishment of an Islamic State with the ISISs leader as its head. Although ISIS has not attacked the UAE, the regime believed the slaying of an American citizen in Abu Dhabi in 2014 was inspired via the internet.⁶⁶⁵

B. BALANCING STRATEGIES OF THE UAE SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

1. Internal Balancing Strategies

a. *Clampdown on Dissents and Palliatives to Buy Support*

The UAE has not experienced public protests like the ones in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. However, the regime was swift to dedicated millions of dollars to deal with the potentiality of protests that may arise as a result of inflation.⁶⁶⁶ Moreover, to prevent a potential escalation of discontent in its poorest emirates, the federal government announced an over a billion dollars investment package for the region.⁶⁶⁷ In short, in the face of the Arab Spring, the Emirati government reacted by reinforced its material legitimacy by increasing distributive expenses from hydrocarbon income.

Creating new jobs and investment package for the poorest emirates are examples of this tactic. At the same time, it took quite harsh repressive measures to ward off any sign of discontent. The repression was primarily targeted at Islamists, mainly due to the government's perception that these groups would be a threat to the legitimacy of the monarchy. Even if the repression was exaggerated, considering that the pressures for reform were only limited,⁶⁶⁸ it is because the government felt that its legitimacy was being

⁶⁶⁴ Al Nahyan, “United Arab Emirates’ Foreign Minister on ISIS, Iran.”

⁶⁶⁵ “UAE Executes Woman for Killing American Teacher,” *BBC News*, 07/13/2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33509804>.

⁶⁶⁶ Zoltan Barany, “The ‘Arab Spring’ in the Kingdoms,” *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, 2012, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12644.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A716fe94538d4de3868a3bc26bc961a15>.

⁶⁶⁷ Marina Ottaway, Marwan Muasher, “Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, yet Unmet.,” *Middle East*, no. December (2011), p. 19, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/12/16/arab-monarchies-chance-for-reform-yet-unmet/8e7t>.

⁶⁶⁸ Christopher M. Davidson, “The Making of a Police State ,” *Foreign Policy*, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/04/14/the-making-of-a-police-state-2/>; Ulrichsen, “The UAE: Holding Back the Tide .”

put at risk and that the regime did not want to accept the demands of reformists and mainly of individuals belonging to the Islamist movements.⁶⁶⁹

As of mid-2011, dozens of people were arrested, and the already limited spaces for civil society to operate were suppressed.⁶⁷⁰ In January 2013, 94 people were formally accused of establishing a secret political organization aiming to overthrow the government and of having links with foreign organizations, namely the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁷¹ Some of the detainees reportedly confessed that the group had a military wing and planned to establish an Islamic state in the country.⁶⁷² In July of the same year, 69 of the 94 accused were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from eight to 15 years.⁶⁷³

While the Arab uprising continued through 2013, the UAE changed its focus from Iran to the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as its affiliates in its neighbourhood, as a significant source of threat. In the same vein, the UAE has become increasingly concerned about local Islamists inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power as a result of the Arab uprising in Egypt and Tunisia. Al-Islah, which is the UAE's MB, intended to work with pro-democracy activists as in Egypt's. The regime in the UAE perceives that if MB is allowed to gain power in Egypt, for example, it could inspire al-Islah to seek change in the UAE. As a result, the UAE took a firm stance against supporting Mursi led MB government that only lasted for a year in Egypt.

Nevertheless, after requesting via a petition in March 2011 the president of the UAE to grant the Federal National Council more legislative powers, the liberals appeared to lose strength because of insufficient support of the masses. When the Arab Spring made a much more brutal turnaround culminating into the Syrian crisis, MB often asked for outside assistance.⁶⁷⁴ However, it was believed that MB had the opportunity to disrupt social stability and cohesion and challenged improvements in societal development.

⁶⁶⁹ Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: An Attempt to Steal the Show," *Gulf News*, 2011, <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/muslim-brotherhood-in-the-gulf-an-attempt-to-steal-the-show-1.805059>.

⁶⁷⁰ Ulrichsen, "The UAE: Holding Back the Tide."

⁶⁷¹ AlKhoori, "UAE Sedition Trial Timeline: Key Dates in the Case."

⁶⁷² Raissa Kasolowsky, "UAE Islamists Had Military Wing, Planned Islamic State: Papers," *Reuters*, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uae-islamists/uae-islamists-had-military-wing-planned-islamic-state-papers-idUSBRE88J0Q120120920>.

⁶⁷³ AlKhoori, "UAE Sedition Trial Timeline: Key Dates in the Case."

⁶⁷⁴ Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations," pp. 167–88.

The United Arab Emirates initiated a crackdown on MB where it arrested almost one hundred Emirati members of Al-Islah and charged them with a secret plot to overthrow the regime. Diplomatic problems between Egypt and the United Arab Emirates stemmed from the arrest of many Egyptians accused of being part of the MB cell in the UAE. They were allegedly plotting against the rulers of the UAE and the Gulf monarchies and charged to court. Abdullah bin Zayed criticised the MB for not having regards for national borders and accused them of plotting to weaken the sovereignty of states. Therefore, to deal with the threat posed by MB, he called for the cooperation of the GCC member states.⁶⁷⁵ Saudi Arabia supported the activities of the UAE government with the remark of Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, who described the MB as the source of all problems in the Islamic world.⁶⁷⁶

This uncompromising stance spread to the Gulf when the regional power changed after the overthrow of the MB, led by Mohammed Mursi in Egypt. MB activists in the GCC criticised the financial and political assistance their governments gave to the new Egyptian military government. This stance contributed to the Saudi authorities' determination to adopt a new anti-terrorism law in early 2014, explicitly enlisting MB as a banned terrorist organisation. In addition, the UAE passed laws on the fight against terrorism as well as designated the MB as a terrorist group. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also put pressure on Western governments, which led to an official investigation of MB affairs in the UK.⁶⁷⁷

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⁶⁷⁵ Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring."

⁶⁷⁶ Eugenio Dacrema, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the GCC New Emerging Balances in the Post-Arab Spring: The Muslim Brotherhood and the Gulf Monarchies," (01/28/2019), http://commonweb.unifr.ch/artsdean/pub/gestens/f/as/files/4760/38695_184356.pdf, p. 4.

⁶⁷⁷ Kristin Smith Diwan, "The Future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf - The Washington Post," (02/03/2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/10/the-future-of-the-muslim-brotherhood-in-the-gulf/?utm_term=.133d4713a7b9.

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Therefore, to deal with the threat posed by MB, he called for the cooperation of the GCC member states.⁶⁷⁸ Saudi Arabia supported the activities of the UAE government with the remark of Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, who described the Muslim Brotherhood as the source of all problems in the Islamic world.⁶⁷⁹ This uncompromising stance spread to the Gulf when the regional power changed after the overthrow of the MB, led by Mohammed Mursi in Egypt. MB activists in the GCC, especially in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, criticised the financial and political assistance their governments give to the new Egyptian military government. This stance contributed to the Saudi authorities' determination to adopt a new anti-terrorism law in early 2014, explicitly enlisting MB as a banned terrorist organisation. The UAE passed laws on the fight against terrorism as well as designated the MB as a terrorist group. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also put pressure on Western governments, which led to an official investigation of MB affairs in the UK.⁶⁸⁰

b. Armament (Military Expenditure and Arms Transfers)

One of the strategies used by the UAE is based on internal balancing through improving and enhancing its military strength. From the internal balancing strategies, the UAE has been spending billions of dollars to order both offensive and defensive weapons from the US, UK and France. It has also established and has been developing its military industries. As a result, the United Arab Emirates has developed enormously potent air forces and high-tech arms. It is believed that with its strengths, instead of depending on Saudi Arabia or the US, the UAE has progressively used its potent conventional forces and other tools to protect and promote its national interest.⁶⁸¹ In short, the UAE has built a spectrum of capability to ensure deterrence in the event of a crisis. The UAE has been undertaking an ambitious military overhaul in the last few years that covers both its naval

⁶⁷⁸ Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring."

⁶⁷⁹ Dacrema, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the GCC New Emerging Balances in the Post-Arab Spring: The Muslim Brotherhood and the Gulf Monarchies." p.4

⁶⁸⁰ Diwan, "The Future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf - The Washington Post."

⁶⁸¹ Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy," 2017, p. 4. www.agsiw.org.

and air forces with state-of-the-art arms. It was able to develop a state-of-the-art air and missile defence capability with the most sophisticated air defence systems from the USA. In addition, since June 2014, it has been engaging in conscription to raise its military's strength.⁶⁸²

In the Gulf region, the UAE's defence industries that date back to the first decade of 2000 are the most robust. However, the defence industries only received more attention recently with the Arab Spring and the fall in the price of crude oil in the world market. In 2014, the UAE created the Emirati Defence Industries Company (EDIC), and since then, due to its emphasis on local arms production, the reliance of the UAE on arms procurement from abroad (the average of 15.5% of the UAE's defence outlay between 2010 and 2019 has been on foreign arms transfers) has reduced.⁶⁸³ The UAE now export low-tech military equipment to other countries in the region and beyond.⁶⁸⁴ As a result, a rise is seen in the defence outlay of the UAE. From 2010 to 2020, the average defence budget of the UAE approximated \$26.5 billion.⁶⁸⁵ In 2020, the UAE spent \$19.8 billion, 5.6% as a share of its GDP.⁶⁸⁶

<i>Table 10: UAE's Military Spending from 2011-2020</i>										
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
MILEX	9,32	9,32	13,9	14,4	-	-	-	-	19,3	19,8
% Change	7.7	0	49.1	4	-	-	-	-	-	2.6
Data Source: IISS Military Balance										

Undoubtedly, the United States is the biggest provider of weapons to the United Arab Emirates, accounting for about 63.23% of arms imports since 2011. The United Arab Emirates give the United States rights base military in its ports in exchange for advanced defence systems. The UAE has diversified its weapons sources to include

⁶⁸² Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies," pp. 95–112.

⁶⁸³ Haena Jo, "Can the UAE Emerge as a Leading Global Defense Supplier?," *Defense News*, 02/2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/idx/2021/02/15/can-the-uae-emerge-as-a-leading-global-defense-supplier/>.

⁶⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁵ "United Arab Emirates (UAE) Defense Market Outlook to 2025: Size & Drivers, Budget Allocation & Key Challenges," *Research and Market*, (05/25/2021), <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/03/02/1993237/0/en/United-Arab-Emirates-UAE-Defense-Market-Outlook-to-2025-Size-Drivers-Budget-Allocation-Key-Challenges-Import-Export-Dynamics-Market-Opportunities-Competitive-Landscape-Strategic-In.html>.

⁶⁸⁶ Jo, "Can the UAE Emerge as a Leading Global Defense Supplier?"

increased purchases from France, Turkey, Spain, Italy, Sweden and Russia. This is in a bid to avoid too much dependence on the monopoly of American weapons. Russian Federation and the UAE share expanding strategic partnership. This relationship transformed Russia into a major arms supplier for the Emirates. Currently, in this decade, Russia weapons the UAE is approximately 3.11%

Consistent with threat perception from Iranian missiles, the Emirates enhanced its air defence capabilities through the procurement of Patriot missile systems in the past few years and also purchased the Thermal high-altitude Area defence system in a 4.3 billion US dollars deal from the United States of America. In 2012, the UAE requested \$ 1.135 billion for an additional 48 interceptors and nine launchers.⁶⁸⁷ The United Arab Emirates made an order for extra THAAD interceptors and associated equipment in a \$2 billion deal in September 2013.⁶⁸⁸ In addition, the United Arab Emirates commenced receiving its newly acquired THAAD batteries for missile defence to boost its missile defence by the end of 2015.⁶⁸⁹ The UAE is the pioneer buyer of THAAD within the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia is following suit in a \$15 billion deal to purchase 44 units of THAAD.⁶⁹⁰

From 2010 to 2014, the UAE bought 24 armed AT 802 air tractors from the US. IOMAX initially produced them as an agricultural aircraft, but they were later utilised as thrush aircraft, known as Archangel. The Archangel became famous for combat insurgents due to its low cost. The UAE employed them in offensive operations in Libya and Yemen, though they had been acquired as a UAE border patrol aircraft.⁶⁹¹ Due to its involvement in Yemen, the UAE needed to intercept missile deployed by the Houthi rebels. For that reason, it used its older Patriot missile systems to that effect.⁶⁹²

The UAE implemented, for the first time in its history, in June 2014, mandatory military service. In addition, it enacted a law that imposes 9 months for adults between

⁶⁸⁷ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *Military Balance*, vol. 114, no. 1 (2014), p. 304, doi:10.1080/04597222.2014.871884.

⁶⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁹ "The Military Balance Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," 2017, p. 409-10 doi:10.1080/04597222.2017.1271213.

⁶⁹⁰ Mike Stone, "Saudi Arabia Inks Deal for Lockheed's Missile Defense System," *Reuters*, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arms-missiledefense/saudi-arabia-inks-deal-for-lockheeds-missile-defense-system-idUSKCN1NX2YJ>.

⁶⁹¹ Frank Slijper, *Under the Radar: The United Arab Emirates, Arms Transfers and Regional Conflict*, Pax, ed. by Susan Clark, 2017.

⁶⁹² *ibid.*

the ages of 18 and 30 who have a degree, and 24 months for those that do not have a degree. In addition to solving the problem of employment, it increases the idea of common national belonging and creating opportunities for young people who might be open to the Arab Uprisings debate.⁶⁹³

In 2014, permission was requested by the UAE to purchase over 4,500 mine-proof vehicles of different models from the Pentagon, of which approximately 500 were supplied in 2017. The proportions of the purchase suggested that the UAE is expected to send a couple of them to the Allied forces. For instance, Cayman landmines were in reality, found to be used by local forces in Yemen with the help and support of the UAE.

Recently, a selection of arms offers that was likely used in the war in Yemen has been approved by the US. The sale of 6,600 guided bombs such as GBU 12 Paveway and GBU 31 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) was justified by the UAE's involvement within the Saudi led framework to reinstate the de jure authorities in Yemen and the need to resist the Houthi rebellion.⁶⁹⁴ Furthermore, the US has approved export in 2016 over 14,000 guidance kits for the JDAM and Paveway missiles employed by UAE fighters. Moreover, due to the effectiveness of the JDAM against hard targets, it could be used to shell nuclear facilities in Iran.⁶⁹⁵

In 2015, the UAE made an order for 2 C17 aircraft, upon delivery, which, is going to increase its fleet size to 8 aircraft. This effort is to enhance its airlift capability. Nevertheless, attempts to determine and get a successor to their fleet Mirage in the fourth quarter of 2015 happens to be unsuccessful. Towards the end of 2015, the UAE fulfilled the enduring prerequisite for the Airborne Early Warning (AEW) capability by signing a deal for Bombardier Global 600 airframes.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹³ Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies," p. 104.

⁶⁹⁴ "United Arab Emirates (UAE) – Guided Bomb Units (GBU-31s and GBU-12s)," *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, (02/11/2019), <https://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/united-arab-emirates-uae-guided-bomb-units-gbu-31s-and-gbu-12s>.

⁶⁹⁵ Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy." p.20

⁶⁹⁶ "The Military Balance Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," 2016, doi:10.1080/04597222.2016.1127573.

Obama authorised the sale of 37 Apache attack helicopters produced by Boeing in a \$3.5 billion deal in 2016.⁶⁹⁷ Between 2015 and 2016, Raytheon supplied 1,000 TALON missiles for Apache helicopters (with a thousand extra on order) to UAE in a \$117 million deal. TALON missile, which was earlier used exclusively by helicopters and aircraft, was equipped to NIMR armoured personnel carrier by Abu Dhabi based NIMR Automotive and Raytheon.⁶⁹⁸ Shortly before US President Trump's trip to the Middle East in May 2017, the US announced a \$2 billion deal to sell the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 air defence worth \$2 billion. This deal is one of the largest arms transfer agreement in 2017.⁶⁹⁹

Presently, France is the second-largest arms exporter to the UAE. From 2011 to 2017, France accounts for 10.74 per cent of UAEs total arms import. France opened its first permanent military base in the Gulf in Abu Dhabi precisely in 2009. The base was established due to the mutual threat they both perceived from Iran. It is said that France will strike back should Iran attack.⁷⁰⁰ Although the UAE has a lot of options regarding the replacement of its old mirage 2000 jet fighters, it is yet to solidify an agreement with Dassault Aviation on a deal that will see 60 new Rafale jets in its fleet.⁷⁰¹ The UAE intends to sell its mirage to Iraq, but France is hesitating on allowing them.⁷⁰² Simultaneously, Abu Dhabi utilises the mirage in its Yemeni campaign.⁷⁰³ In 2011, a deal of 800m Euros between UAE and France was signed to purchase Baynunah Class Corvettes used in the Yemen campaign.

With time, Russia is gradually gaining more importance in arms exports to the UAE. As said earlier, Russian weapons in UAE accounts for about 3.11% since 2011.

⁶⁹⁷ Aaron Mehta, "UAE Apaches, Saudi Chinooks Top Massive \$7.9 Billion Weapon Sales Plan," *Pentagon*, 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2016/12/08/uae-apaches-saudi-chinooks-top-massive-7-9-billion-weapon-sales-plan/>.

⁶⁹⁸ "Raytheon, NIMR to Integrate TALON Laser-Guided Rockets, Anti-Tank Missiles onto UAE Ground Vehicle," (02/12/2019), <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/raytheon-nimr-to-integrate-talon-laser-guided-rockets-anti-tank-missiles-onto-uae-ground-vehicle-300037417.html>.

⁶⁹⁹ Slijper, *Under the Radar: The United Arab Emirates, Arms Transfers and Regional Conflict*.

⁷⁰⁰ Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, "The GCC-Iran Conflict and Its Strategic Implications for the Gulf Region," vol. 35, no. 2 (2010), p.273, doi:10.1080/09700161.2011.542923.

⁷⁰¹ Valerie Insinna, "Middle East Fighter Jet Sales to Surge over the next 5 Years," *Defence News*, (02/07/2019), <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/dubai-air-show/2017/11/09/middle-east-fighter-jet-sales-to-surge-over-the-next-5-years/>.

⁷⁰² Awad Mustafa, "UAE Eyes Moving Mirage Fighters to Iraq's Kurdish Areas, Procuring Rafales," 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2016/01/23/uae-eyes-moving-mirage-fighters-to-iraq-s-kurdish-areas-procuring-rafales/>.

⁷⁰³ Slijper, *Under the Radar: The United Arab Emirates, Arms Transfers and Regional Conflict*.

According to SIPRI data, between 2009 and 2013, approximately an \$800m deal was signed between UAE and Russia. Based on the agreement, 50 Pantsyr movable air defence systems were mounted on German Man trucks and 1,000 SA 19 missiles. Furthermore, during the International Defence Exhibition arms fair in Abu Dhabi in 2017, the UAE and Russia sealed a deal of \$709 million for the supply of antitank missiles, which is the biggest contract in the arms fair.⁷⁰⁴ Abu Dhabi has also expressed interest in the Su35 and worked together to produce a 5th generation fighter jet that will be based upon the MiG 29 slated to take off in 2018.⁷⁰⁵ But this has not materialised because of US pressure and its reluctance to deliver its F35 jets to UAE.⁷⁰⁶

Something worth mentioning is the UAEs \$100 million arms transfer from North Korea in 2015 in its desire to stop Iran from having access to North Korea's advanced technology. The weapons are being used in Yemen against the Houthis.⁷⁰⁷

Table 11: Total Arms to the UAE from 1970-2020.

	1970-1979	1980-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020	Total
Total	1251	2985	4610	9338	10,927	29,111
% Change		138.60	54.43	102.55	17	

Data source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

2. External Balancing Strategies

a. Alliance commitment: UAE and the Uprisings in Bahrain

The elite in the UAE linked the demonstrations in Bahrain to Tehran's meddling in the Gulf and beyond. Consequently, to balance Iran, the UAE approved the GCC's decision to offer military assistance to Bahrain during the Arab Spring 2011 demonstrations. Abu Dhabi's swift response to the demonstrations in Manama shows how that could affect the legitimacy of the Gulf monarchs if left unchecked. The UAE was concerned about the prevention of the spillover effect of the uprising. Still, it chooses to follow a policy of intervening because the uprising constituted a threat to its security. According to Anwar Gargash, "[t]he security and stability in the region requires all of us to stand united in one rank so as to safeguard our national gains and prevent any strife for

⁷⁰⁴ "UAE Signs \$700Mln Anti-Tank Missile Contract With Russia - Sputnik International," (02/11/2019), <https://sputniknews.com/military/201702221050930015-uae-russia-anti-tank-missiles/>.

⁷⁰⁵ Insinna, "Middle East Fighter Jet Sales to Surge over the next 5 Years."

⁷⁰⁶ Slijper, *Under the Radar: The United Arab Emirates, Arms Transfers and Regional Conflict*. p. 17.

⁷⁰⁷ Samuel Ramani, "Why Did the UAE Purchase Weapons From North Korea?," *The Diplomat*, (02/14/2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/why-did-the-uae-purchase-weapons-from-north-korea/>.

a better future.” Comments like this reflected the Gulf leaders’ deep feelings of tension that resulted from demonstrations by opposition requesting the Al Khalifa regime be overthrown and replaced with a democratic form of administration.

The UAE viewed the uprising in Bahrain as interference by Iran, and for such reason, it sent military police via the PSF to help the authorities in Bahrain to restore order. Indeed, the UAE’s joining of the PSF responded to a request from the al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain. As Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed noted, Manama “*asked us to look at ways to help them to defuse tension*”,⁷⁰⁸ and Abu Dhabi contributed 500 police in the Bahraini operation.⁷⁰⁹ The UAE’s police are there to protect infrastructure in Bahrain, while the Bahraini army dealt with protestors.⁷¹⁰

b. The UAE and the War in Yemen

Together with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the UAE was also involved in Yemen to balance its threat perceptions. The UAE intervened in Yemen for two main reasons; fighting Islamist and balancing Iran. Since 2015, the UAE, in alliance with Saudi Arabia, intervened against the Houthi rebels who received support from Iran. The considerable number of Yemen citizens working in the UAEs police brings the likelihood of the Yemen crisis to impact UAEs security. Furthermore, an issue of central concern to the UAE lies in the future of the al-Islah party and the Yemeni MB. UAE won't want the Yemeni MB in a post-war power arrangement because it perceives MB’s activism in its neighbours as a threat to its security.⁷¹¹ Therefore, the UAE is a crucial part of the military activities of the Saudi Led Arab coalition in Yemen.

The coalition’s initial aim was to restore the country's control to Abdrabbu Mansour Hadi and crush the Houthi-Saleh alliance. The need for more ground-based action culminated in “Operation Golden Arrow,” an amphibious operation led by forces from the United Arab Emirates and the Yemeni army, which took back control of the port

⁷⁰⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

⁷⁰⁹ *ibid.*

⁷¹⁰ Thomas W. Lippman, Alex Vatanka, Thomas R. Mattair, “Symposium: A Reawakened Rivalry: The GCC v. Iran,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2011), p. 13, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00507.x.

⁷¹¹ Ragab, “Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring.” p. 44-5

city of Aden, marking the coalition's strategic shift to war more dynamic, with more excellent technological-military investment.⁷¹² Abu Dhabi aims to train and support pro-government groups in their military encounters with the Houthi rebels.

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE fears the establishment of Lebanon like Hezbollah in Yemen, which would eventually be a threat to the Gulf states. The coalition views the Houthis as Iran's proxy in Yemen because they received training from the IRGC and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁷¹³ On the one hand, Abu Dhabi worked within the Saudi-led coalition umbrella, which started the war in Yemen against the Houthis believed to be backed by Iran to balance Tehran. On the other hand, the UAE was in Yemen to fight Islamist and terrorist, which is perceived as more threatening to its regime than Iran. *"The UAE's evaluations of threat perceptions differ markedly from those held by Saudi Arabia and have caused Emirati policymakers to adopt a more nuanced approach towards Iran than their Saudi counterparts."*⁷¹⁴ In Yemen, like in other places, the UAE's goal of tackling Iran has been second after its primary aim of fighting the Islamists. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, rolling back Iran's influence is their main reason for executing the war against the Houthis. Therefore, the difference in strategy between Saudi Arabia and the UAE was noticed during the war. As Neil Quilliam averred, because Islamist current has transnational appeal and are unwilling to come to a concession with the current political order, leaders of the UAE perceive Islamist as more threatening than Iran.⁷¹⁵

Initially, Abu Dhabi played a co-leading role with Riyadh by providing 30 warplanes and a ground army with Colombian mercenaries.⁷¹⁶ Nevertheless, Abu Dhabi acted unilaterally by supporting separatist in the south, while the Saudis worked with

⁷¹² Ralph Shield, "The Saudi Air War in Yemen: A Case for Coercive Success through Battlefield Denial," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2018), pp. 461–89, doi:10.1080/01402390.2017.1308863.

⁷¹³ Abdullah Abdulkhaleq, "Why the UAE Is Fighting in Yemen," *Gulf News*, 2015.

⁷¹⁴ Samuel Ramani, "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears," *The National Interest*, 2017.

⁷¹⁵ Neil Quilliam, 2017 in Ramani, "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears."

⁷¹⁶ Michael Knights, Alex Almeida, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-saudi-uae-war-effort-in-yemen-part-1-operation-golden-arrow-in-aden>; Khalid Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, "The Foreign Policies of the Small Gulf States: An Exception in Small States' Behaviours?," *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 182–90; Mark Mazzeti, Emily B. Hager, "Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight," *The New York Times*, 2015.

Islamist MB affiliated al-Islah in the north to fight the Houthis. Indeed, *“the UAE supports pro-Iran Shia factions that promote political stability and rejects Iran’s destabilizing interventions in the domestic affairs of Middle East states.”*⁷¹⁷

The UAE forces have brutalized the Islamists in the areas they control and opposed association with Al-Islah. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates depend on a coalition of militia in south Yemen. Al-Islah was the most potent adversary of the Houthis from 2011 to 2013 and was a coalition of Islamists, local militias and Salafists. When Riyadh and Abu Dhabi agreed to combat the MB, it suspended the support al-Islah enjoyed from them,⁷¹⁸ but only to start working with them again in 2015. The UAE established during the war a coalition that included fragments of the Yemeni Government forces, tribal militias (the Hadrami Elite Forces and Shabwani Elite), separatists (such as the security Belt Forces who happen to be UAE’s most important ally),⁷¹⁹ as well as the Salafists in south Yemen. The UAE perceive Salafi as less threatening than the MB Islamists since they are committed to the current administration.⁷²⁰

The UAE’s continued support of Yemeni separatists led to a rift between it and the Hadi government that have Riyadh’s full backing.⁷²¹ As a result of the divergence of interest, the alliance between Hadi and the separatists in the South broke in 2017.⁷²² The dispute escalated as the governor of Aden Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, who has been loyal to the UAE was sacked at the end of April, by Hadi. Then the embattled former governor established the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which worked to establish an independent nation in Southern Yemen and became the most potent affiliate of the UAE in Yemen.

⁷¹⁷ Ramani, “The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears.”

⁷¹⁸ *ibid.*

⁷¹⁹ Abdul-Ahad, “Yemen on the Brink: How the UAE Is Profiting from the Chaos of Civil War.”

⁷²⁰ Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

⁷²¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, Umberto Profazio, “New Armies for a New Era Decrypting Post-2011 Arab Military Reform Trends,” (10/24/2020).

⁷²² Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

With the help of the UAE, the Separatists were able to control the city following a battle that ensued in January 2018.⁷²³ According to Samuel Ramani, Abu Dhabi “is [committed] to supporting secular forces in Yemen, regardless of their sectarian affiliation” to the point of even fighting the “Saudi-aligned al-Islah militias.” Ramani further argued that “[t]he growing contrast between Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s approaches to handling regional crises suggests that a future escalation of Riyadh–Abu Dhabi tensions is likely, and could be harder to resolve than the Riyadh-Doha standoff.”⁷²⁴ However, in late 2017 following Ali Abdullah Saleh’s killing by the Houthis, Abu Dhabi understood that al-Islah is the only likely ally present. Consequently, Abu Dhabi agreed to work with al-Islah after it decided to disassociate from the transnational MB activism formally.⁷²⁵

The UAE declared in July 2019 that it would cease from the war in Yemen and withdraw the bulk of its army stationed there,⁷²⁶ so it was no longer feasible to conduct land campaigns against the Houthis. Abu Dhabi publicly announced its intention to help in the United Nations-sponsored negotiations in Stockholm.⁷²⁷ Yet, seen from a different angle, one might claim that the UAE’s action is linked to worsening US-Iran tensions and how prone it could be to Iranian retribution.

In 2019, Abu Dhabi did not keep Iran officially accountable for the harm done to the tankers when Iran struck ships around the Hormuz Strait. Indeed, after the first attack in May 2019, Anwar Gargash tweeted, “Tensions in the Gulf can only be addressed politically. Crisis long in the making requires collective attention; primarily to deescalate & to find political solutions through dialogue & negotiations. Regional voices [are] important to achieve sustainable solutions.”⁷²⁸ Moreover, the UAE discussed matter

⁷²³ “UAE-Backed Separatists Launch ‘coup’ in Southern Yemen,” *Al Jazeera News*, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/28/uae-backed-separatists-launch-coup-in-southern-yemen/>; Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

⁷²⁴ Ramani, “The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears.”

⁷²⁵ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, “Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the ‘Arab Spring.’”

⁷²⁶ Declan Walsh, David D. Kirkpatrick, “U.A.E Pulls Most Forces From Yemen in Blow Saudi War Effort,” *The New York Times*, (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/world/middleeast/yemen-emirates-saudi-war.html>.

⁷²⁷ Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

⁷²⁸ Anwar Gargash, “on Twitter: ‘Tensions in the Gulf Can Only Be Addressed Politically...’,” *Twitter*, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AnwarGargash/status/1142714628646068225>.

maritime safety around the Hormuz Straits with Iran.⁷²⁹ Of course, the UAE decided to give a relaxing massage to Iran when tension was rising.

c. The UAE and the Blockade of Qatar

In Doha, Abu Dhabi aims to counter the threat of political Islam and Tehran, given its rising influence in the region. While what has been considered most disagreeable in the case of Riyadh and Manama is Doha's good dealings with Tehran, Abu Dhabi is particularly dismayed by Qatar's sympathy towards Islamists and political Islam. Although Qatar's regional policy has triggered significant discontent among its GCC neighbours after the Arab Uprisings, it has been its policies towards Egypt that have persuaded the UAE to move against it. Qatar has lent a hand to President Muhammad Morsi's administration with billions in financial aid.⁷³⁰

Abu Dhabi had no second thought of getting rid of the MB in Egypt as it will give it chance to balance its primary threat perception, political Islamists al-Islah which may be inspired by the Egyptian MB with possible support from Doha. However, due to the coup against the MB in Egypt, the good relationship between Qatar and Egypt witnessed a severe setback as their relations rapidly worsened. This was partly attributed to several MB members who moved to Qatar to escape persecution by the new military junta in Cairo.⁷³¹

In addition, the fall of Morsi was a watershed moment in the dispute with Abu Dhabi, which attempted in 2013 to diminish Doha's ascendancy within and outside the Middle east. Since then, Abu Dhabi worked with Riyadh to pressure Doha. Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Manama recalled their envoys from Qatar in March 2014 and proscribed the Cairo based MB and other groups affiliated with it as terrorist organisations. This action worked as if it forced Doha to eventually concede and sent many MB members out of its

⁷²⁹ David D. Kirkpatrick, Farnaz Fassihi, "Hard-Liners in Iran See No Drawback to Bellicose Strategy," *The New York Times*, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-oil-attack.html>.

⁷³⁰ Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*.

⁷³¹ Hossam Bahgat, Mostafa Mohie, "Exclusive Wikileaks Cables Trace Ebb and Flow of Egypt-UAE Relations Exclusive Wikileaks Cables Trace Ebb and Flow of Egypt-UAE Relations," *Middle East Policy Platform*, 2015, <https://www.me-policy.org/2015/07/26/exclusive-wikileaks-cables-trace-ebb-and-flow-of-egypt-uae-relations-2/>; Abigail Hauslohner, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Finds Havens Abroad," *The Washington Post*, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-finds-havens-abroad/2013/11/05/438f2dfe-463a-11e3-95a9-3f15b5618ba8_story.html.

territory. Consequently, the dispute thawed, and in November 2014, the envoys were reinstated.⁷³²

When Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani became the emir of Qatar, there was an expectation of aligned foreign and security policies with Riyadh. However, it soon became clear that Doha did not want to alter its foreign and security policies to match that of the UAE or even Saudi Arabia. The initial test was evidenced in its activities against Abu Dhabi's sponsoring militias that were pivotal in the taking of Tripoli in 2014. The coming to power of Donald Trump as the US president in 2017 and the change of leadership in Saudi Arabia that happened in 2015 strengthened the circumstances for Abu Dhabi to make a fresh move to push Doha to accede.

Donald Trump is believed to have given Abu Dhabi and Riyadh the green light to take a tougher stance on Qatar.⁷³³ Indeed, the successful lobbying of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in the US saw Donald Trump making his first visit abroad to Saudi Arabia following his inauguration.⁷³⁴ On a two-day trip in May 2017, Donald Trump visited Saudi Arabia, where he met various leaders of the Gulf of which the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi was part just before the ensuing dispute. Trump saw the Saudi led axis as a partner to his anti-Iranian plan outlined in his electioneering.⁷³⁵

Subsequently, the Arab Quartet (Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Manama and Cairo) together with Yemen severed diplomatic ties and blocked ground, air and sea boundaries of Doha in June 2017.⁷³⁶ Subsequently, the quartet approached Doha with a list of 13 demands Qatar should abide by if the blockade must be removed. Among the requests are that its warm relations with Iran be reduced, stopping the funding of the MB and other groups regarded as terrorists, revoke its Al-Jazeera Channels' license, closure of the Turkish

⁷³² Matthias Sailer, "Changed Priorities in the Gulf: Saudi Arabia and the Emirates Rethink Their Relationship with Egypt," *SWP Comments*, vol. 8 (2016), pp. 1–8; Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷³³ Anne Barnard, David D. Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind - The New York Times," (10/24/2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia-egypt-bahrain-united-arab-emirates.html>.

⁷³⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick et al., "The Wooing of Jared Kushner: How the Saudis Got a Friend in the White House," *The New York Times*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/world/middleeast/saudi-mbs-jared-kushner.html>.

⁷³⁵ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷³⁶ Barnard, Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind - The New York Times."

military base, among other items.⁷³⁷ If Doha had gone with the demand of the Quartet, it would have implied the end of its independent foreign policy. However, Qatar declined to yield to neighbour's pressure; instead, it reinforced its ties to Ankara and Tehran and preserved their regional policies as much as possible.⁷³⁸

d. UAE's Meddling in Egypt and Sudan

Like in Saudi Arabia, the unanticipated demise of Hosni Mubarak, which was the outcome of the Arab Uprisings, shocked those at the helm of authority in the UAE. Although Mubarak's demise presented a threat to Gulf regimes, since Mubarak is a long-time friend and they are pro-West focused in their foreign policy, the UAE is concerned mainly with the growth of MB and political Islamists. Therefore, the Emirates backed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to maintain hold of the change from Mubarak to the new regime. In the Spring of 2011, the UAE promised USD 3.3 billion in funding for Egypt, but the sum ultimately spent remains uncertain⁷³⁹ due to the coming to prominence of MB to power via parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012.

The UAE, alongside Saudi Arabia organised a military takeover with the Egyptian military after the MB gained power in Egypt. In addition to making contact with Abd al-Fattah Al-Sisi and providing money for the coup conspirators, they also bankrolled the resistance movement against Morsi and the MB through a partnership with youth rebellion that generated the convenient excuse for the military takeover.⁷⁴⁰ The military, headed by Al-Sisi, overthrew the MB-led government of Mursi and took power on July 3, 2013. Islamists' demonstrations were brutalized; over a thousand demonstrators were murdered while tens of thousands, together with Morsi and all MB representatives, have been detained. In September 2013, the group was outlawed and in December of the same

⁷³⁷ "Arab States Issue 13 Demands to End Qatar-Gulf Crisis," *Al Jazeera*, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/12/arab-states-issue-13-demands-to-end-qatar-gulf-crisis>.

⁷³⁸ Ben Hubbard, "That Punishing Blockade? 'We've Moved On,' Qatar Says," *The New York Times*, (10/24/2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/middleeast/qatar-blockade-goods.html>; Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷³⁹ Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*, p. 200.

⁷⁴⁰ Mahmut Rantisi, Emrah Kekilli, "Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'nin Dış Politikası," *SETA Analiz*, 2017; Louisa Loveluck, "Egypt's Military Rise to Power 'Partly Bankrolled by Emirates', Audio Recording Suggests," *The Telegraph*, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/11445060/Egypt-military-rise-to-power-partly-bankrolled-by-Emirates-audio-recording-suggests.html>.

year, labelled a terrorist organization in Cairo.⁷⁴¹ The Muslim Brotherhood and various associated organizations were also declared terrorists in the United Arab Emirates, aside from ISIS and al-Qaida. Additional organizations including the Houthis, Shiite militias in Iraq and radical Shiite groups in the Gulf have also been identified as terrorists in the UAE.⁷⁴²

The United Arab Emirates was very helpful to the regime of Al-Sisi by dispatching their unit to train Egyptian troops and help the state in its war against ISIS. On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates also participated actively in terrorist operations.⁷⁴³ The initiatives of Cairo and Abu Dhabi to undertake the MB campaign and to influence developments in Libya have been coordinated. Both countries have been active in encouraging eradicating Islamist groups and associated militia by working with the LNA in eastern Libya.⁷⁴⁴

Abu Dhabi has by far become the Al-Sisi regime's largest international partner. It spends and helps battle the Islamist militants in Sinai. From 2013 and 2019, the UAE donated over \$20 billion, making it the biggest funder from a gulf state to Cairo.⁷⁴⁵ In October 2011, whereas the UAE revealed a \$3 billion aid to Egypt, it took no genuine stride in fulfilling that pledge. The reason was very closely linked to the time the Mursi was leading Egypt. However, with the coup d'état that brought Al-Sisi to power, it is worth mentioning the economic activism of the UAE in Egypt. Egypt got 12 billion USD in funding within a week of the takeover, and it was immediately disbursed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwaiti.⁷⁴⁶ The United Arab Emirates provided an additional \$3.9 billion in assistance to Cairo, in July 2013, in addition to a \$1 billion grant to Egypt and

⁷⁴¹ Mohannad Sabry, "Egypt Declares Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Group," *Al-Monitor*, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/egypt-brotherhood-terrorist-organization-cabinet.html>.

⁷⁴² "List of Groups Designated Terrorist Organisations by the UAE."

⁷⁴³ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷⁴⁴ Harb, "An Economic Explanation for Egypt's Alignment in the GCC Crisis."

⁷⁴⁵ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷⁴⁶ Patrick Werr, "UAE Offers Egypt \$3 Billion Support, Saudis \$5 Billion," *Reuters*, (10/25/2020); Robert F. Worth, "Egypt Is Arena for Influence of Arab Rivals," *The New York Times*, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/world/middleeast/egypt-is-arena-for-influence-of-arab-rivals.html>.

a \$2 billion credit with no interest.⁷⁴⁷ Moreover, Abu Dhabi has helped Cairo by offering \$8.6 billion in loans to fund crude oil purchases.⁷⁴⁸

In the Sudanese scene, the UAE was worried that Sudan would step into the domain of Turkey and Qatar through a strong revolution. From the onset of the crisis in Yemen, Abu Dhabi was looking for ways to strengthen ties with the Omar al-Bashir government, which had provided mercenaries to the Saudi anti-Houthi alliance.⁷⁴⁹ However, owing to his disgust at al-Bashir's link with the MB and friendly ties with Ankara and Doha, Abu Dhabi soon lost trust in the leadership of Bashir and thus smoothened the path to a coup d'état against him during the Sudanese uprisings. Abu Dhabi did so by discontinuing the deliveries of fuel to Khartoum in December 2018 to disrupt the economic stability of the regime Omar al-Bashir was heading.⁷⁵⁰ Due to the concern arising from the success in Sudan's uprising, which would have shifted Khartoum into the complete sphere of Ankara and Doha's influence, Abu Dhabi was fast to reach out to the transitional government of Abdul Fattah al-Burhan.⁷⁵¹ After the coup, financial aid of up to 3 billion US dollars was offered to the transitional government by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.⁷⁵² Like in Cairo, Abu Dhabi worked to see that after the collapse of al-Bashir, the military remains germane in politics and that members of the opposition movement are not permitted to seize control.⁷⁵³

e. The UAE in the Horn of Africa

Given the security and economic interests that have strengthened the Horn of Africa's position in the UAE's foreign policy, Abu Dhabi has strengthened its presence and influence in the region, primarily through soft power and economic leverage. Abu

⁷⁴⁷ Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," p. 131.

⁷⁴⁸ Middle East Monitor, "Gulf Countries Supported Egypt with \$92bn since 2011," *Middle East Monitor*, 03/19/2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190319-gulf-countries-supported-egypt-with-92bn-since-2011/>.

⁷⁴⁹ Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy," p. 16.

⁷⁵⁰ Khalid Abdelaziz, Michael Georgy, Maha El Dahan, "Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir Was Destined to Fall," *Reuters*, 07/03/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-bashir-fall/>.

⁷⁵¹ France 24, "Sudan's Burhan, from Relative Unknown to Regional Player," *France 24*, 03/06/2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190603-sudans-burhan-relative-unknown-regional-player>.

⁷⁵² Khalid Abdelaziz, "Saudi Arabia, UAE to Send \$3 Billion in Aid to Sudan," *Reuters*, 04/21/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests-idUSKCN1RX0DG>.

⁷⁵³ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

Dhabi's attempts to place under its watch the most prominent seaports of the Gulf of Aden, especially in Puntland and Somaliland, shows how aggressive it is in its regional policy. Indeed, the UAE is becoming a global trading centre linking the Middle East, Africa and Asia to producers and customers worldwide.

Dubai Ports World (DP World) is a public shipping corporation with several terminals worldwide. DP World operates ports that it finds crucial for the future of both the global economy and the strategic aspirations of the United Arab States.⁷⁵⁴ The view of DP World illustrates why Abu Dhabi has taken the most significant part in the Indian Ocean piracy operations in the Gulf and is the most active in Somalia's domestic politics. It also emphasizes its role in the Yemen conflict. There is no doubt that the apprehension of the Iranian takeover of the Arabian Peninsula is guiding the UAE's alignment with the Saudi to combat the Houthis. But this military contribution must also be seen in the larger UAE for self-defence and its desire to take key roles in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.⁷⁵⁵

In Djibouti, Eritrea and Somaliland, DP World has acquired ports. Due to the dual use of Aden, Assab and Berbera ports, which permit Abu Dhabi to use it for naval and air operation alongside its economic interests, regional countries, such as Ethiopia, have been frustrated. Ethiopia is worried over the UAE's domination of imports and exports that resulted from the support it received from Addis Ababa's traditional rivals, Eritrea and Somalia.⁷⁵⁶ The UAE also played a vital role in the Eritrean-Ethiopian peace agreement to end the 20-year war in 2018. The UAE has invested \$3 billion in financial aid to the country was an attempt by the UAE to bring Ethiopia into the ranks of its allies and keep it away from Tehran and the Doha and Ankara axis that have many economic and military agreements with Qatar and Turkey.⁷⁵⁷

Djibouti was one of the countries that the UAE had the container Terminal at the Dorelah Port. With the war in Yemen, by default, Djibouti becomes the launching point

⁷⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 15.

⁷⁵⁵ Alex Mello, Michael Knights, "How Eritrea Became a Major UAE Military Base," *TesfaNews*, 09/02/2016, <https://www.tesfanews.net/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/>; Miller, Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," p. 15.

⁷⁵⁶ *ibid.* p. 15.

⁷⁵⁷ Giorgio Cafiero, Corrado Čok, "Divide and Survive: Ethiopia's Relations with the Gulf and Turkey," *The New Arab*, 06/25/2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/6/25/divide-and-survive-ethiopia-balances-gulf-turkey-ties>.

of the UAE. However, due to a dispute with Djibouti, the UAE had to alter the plans of using the port for the war in Yemen.⁷⁵⁸ Abu Dhabi's arrangement with Eritrea is a 30-year lease deal for using a deep-water port and the Assab Airport, all of which have also been used in military operations.⁷⁵⁹ From the Red Sea and its naval and air bases in Eritrea, Abu Dhabi strikes against Yemeni Houthis and Assisted Egypt's al-Sisi to counter MB and Tehran.

Moreover, it has agreed to build a naval base in the port of Berbera with Somaliland.⁷⁶⁰ The move has led to the intensification of friction between the Mogadishu and Somaliland leaders. With the ports, the UAE controls the area's economy, which gives it a competitive edge that none of its rivals has.⁷⁶¹ Indeed, Abu Dhabi has established a "Maritime Empire" in the region.⁷⁶²

f. The UAE in Syria

For the UAE, the uprising in Syria was an opportunity to counter growing Iranian influence and its links to Hezbollah. When the uprisings in Syria started, Abu Dhabi endorsed Syria's dismissal from the Arab League by agreeing with GCC (Muscat being the exception) that the Assad regime's unfaithful persecution of peaceful protesters robbed him of the moral right to rule Syria. However, the upsurge of Iran within and beyond the Gulf, evidenced in its influence in Iraq, Syria, and direct contact with Hezbollah, has radically altered the regional power balance. As the strength of Iran in the Levant rises, Syria became the core of the GCC states' strategic interests.⁷⁶³ Therefore, the UAE proposes a diplomatic settlement for the Syrian crisis, including Washington

⁷⁵⁸ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷⁵⁹ Mello, Knights, "How Eritrea Became a Major UAE Military Base."

⁷⁶⁰ İsmail Numan Telci, Tuba Öztürk Horoz, "Military Bases in the Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2018), doi:10.25253/99.2018202.11.

⁷⁶¹ Miller, Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," *ibid.*

⁷⁶² Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷⁶³ Emile Hokayem, "The Gulf States and Syria," *United States Institute Of Peace*, 2011, www.usip.org•Tel.202.457.1700•Fax.202.429.6063.

and Moscow, with Islamists groups rising while accepting that Assad remains in control as part of a peace deal.⁷⁶⁴

The UAE also split with Saudi Arabia by endorsing Russia's involvement in 2015 in Syria and condemning "common enemy" (i.e., terrorists such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda). According to Anwar Gargash, the UAE's state minister for foreign affairs, "we agree that nobody will be upset by the Russian bombardment of Daesh or Al-Qaeda as it targets a common enemy."⁷⁶⁵ Furthermore, since 2016, Abu Dhabi believed that Assad's acceptance would diminish Iran's influence in Damascus. Moreover, Abu Dhabi supported the re-admission of Syria to the Arab League.⁷⁶⁶

The stance of the UAE in Syria concerning the Turkish peace operations is caused by a wider rivalry between the UAE and Turkey, which was brought about by close Turkish relations with Doha, its close ties to the MB and the conflicting ambition in East Africa.⁷⁶⁷ Abu Dhabi is vituperative of Ankara's military campaigns in Syria and sees its actions as an offensive war against a "brotherly Arab state."⁷⁶⁸ Since the core aspect of Abu Dhabi is the fight against Jihadists and the Islamist movement, balancing Ankara's influence in Syria becomes its main priority. In Afrin, the United Arab Emirates saw Turkish-supported Islamists such as the Levant Front and the Sham Legion as a challenge to its idea of a secular state in Syria.⁷⁶⁹ As such, the South Front, a moderate group, was also supported by the UAE via Jordan.⁷⁷⁰ In 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

⁷⁶⁴ Marc Cher-Leparrain, "The UAE Has It in for the Muslim Brotherhood," *The New Arab*, 2017, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/2/23/the-uae-has-it-in-for-the-muslim-brotherhood>; Samuel Ramani, "How Russia Is Courting the Gulf," *The National Interest*, 2016, <http://www.dev.kataeb.org/articles/2016/08/03/how-russia-is-courting-the-gulf>.

⁷⁶⁵ Yahoo news, "UAE Says Ready to Commit Troops to Fight Syria Jihadists," *Yahoo News*, 11/30/2015, <https://news.yahoo.com/uae-says-ready-commit-troops-fight-syria-jihadists-145913099.html>.

⁷⁶⁶ Hassan Hassan, "Syria: Assad Has Decisively Won His Brutal Battle," *The Guardian*, 12/30/2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/30/syria-year-cemented-assad-victory-trump-us-troops>.

⁷⁶⁷ Samuel Ramani, "UAE Steps up Anti-Turkey Efforts in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, 02/25/2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/uae-syria-turkey-containment-efforts-kurds-erdogan.html>.

⁷⁶⁸ Gulf News, "Saudi Arabia, UAE Condemn Turkey's Actions in Syria," *Gulf News*, 10/09/2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/explainer-turkish-operation-may-redraw-map-of-syrian-war-1.67017900>.

⁷⁶⁹ Giorgio Cafiero, "The Afrin Factor in Turkey-UAE Relations," *LobeLog*, 09/05/2018, <https://lobelog.com/the-afrin-factor-in-turkey-uae-relations/>.

⁷⁷⁰ Stanford University, "The Southern Front," *Mapping Militant Organizations*, 02/13/2014, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/645>.

had been funded and equipped by the UAE with Washington.⁷⁷¹ Moreover, the UAE funds the Syrian Movement Tomorrow with an armed wing, the Elite Forces, which is part of the SDF.⁷⁷²

g. The UAE's Aiding of LNA in Libya

The UAE was among the countries that played a pivotal role in enforcing the no-fly zone following the UN resolution 1973 to save civilians in Benghazi.⁷⁷³ What could have driven the UAE was the need to be a worthy collaborator of Washington and NATO. In another reading, the UAE participated in the no-fly zone to compete with Qatar. The UAE only started participating when Qatar deployed six Mirage 2000 and two C-17 transport craft for use by the coalition.⁷⁷⁴ The UAE sent six F-16 and six Mirage 2000 fighters to be used in enforcing the no-fly zone.⁷⁷⁵

However, it later became clear that the UAE aimed to deter Islamists and Jihadist from getting possession of Libya's helm of authority.⁷⁷⁶ Immediately after the fall of Gadhafi, Abu Dhabi established strong relations with leaders such as Mahmud Jibril and Abdurrahim El-Keib in the transition phase and has sought to improve its leverage on Libyan domestic affairs by offering aid to tribes and armed units close to its orientation. With the assistance it got from Abu Dhabi, the National Forces Alliance (NFA) – with its modest Islamic agenda secured 48 per cent and 39 of the 80 party-list seats of the Libyan

⁷⁷¹ Matthew Yglesias, "The US Bombing of Syria Implicates Many of Trump's Business Interests," *Vox*, 04/16/2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/16/17238058/syria-bombing-trump-business-interests>; Cher-Leparrain, "The UAE Has It in for the Muslim Brotherhood."

⁷⁷² Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the UAE: An Ideational Partnership," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2020), pp. 125–40, doi:10.1111/mepo.12479; Joseph Daher, "Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) The Dynamics and Evolution of UAE-Syria Relations: Between Expectations and Obstacles," 2019, www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/.

⁷⁷³ Bruno Pommier, "The Use of Force to Protect Civilians and Humanitarian Action: The Case of Libya and Beyond," (11/22/2020), doi:10.1017/S1816383112000422.

⁷⁷⁴ Reuters, "Qatar First Arab State to Patrol Libya No-Fly Zone," *Reuters*, 03/25/2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-qatar/qatar-first-arab-state-to-patrol-libya-no-fly-zone-idUSTRE72O50D20110325>.

⁷⁷⁵ Kareem Shaheen, "Defensive Shield for the Gulf Created in 1982," *The National*, 2011, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/defensive-shield-for-the-gulf-created-in-1982-1.418896>.

⁷⁷⁶ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

General National Congress.⁷⁷⁷ The MB's Justice and Construction Party (JCP) only won 10 per cent and 17 of the party-list seats.⁷⁷⁸

In the east of Libya, Islamist movements and terrorist of various bearings have also strengthened since 2012. Their power in Benghazi was increased, and significant sections of the city were taken into their jurisdiction by 2014. The first signs were also brought to the light of an IS involvement at Derna located in the Eastern Part of Libya, a Jihadi mainstay, in July 2014.⁷⁷⁹ The slaying of Egyptian security agents along the Libyan frontier in an assault is arguably the fundamental cause for a now quite aggressive Abu Dhabi stance. The UAE being averse to Islamists, seek new partners to stop such expansion. Moreover, the Abu Dhabi elites were worried that Libya's civil war would impact its key partner's stability in its war against Islamists and MB. Therefore, from Egypt, the UAE took out air raids against militias in Misrata.⁷⁸⁰

As the country plunged into crisis, Abu Dhabi identified a collaborator in the person of Khalifa Haftar, Gadhafi's long-time partner that reneged in the late 1980s who was seeking to expand his power from the east of Libya to the whole country since 2014. In order to crush the Islamists, Abu Dhabi aligned with Khalifa Haftar in the summer of 2014. Since then, Haftar replaced the Zintan brigade as Abu Dhabi's main ally by receiving funding and weapons from the Emirates. The Zintan Brigades have been part of Libya's nationalist political landscape and have criticised influential Islamist alliances at an initial point. Given that the UAE found the militia friendly to its vision of not letting Islamist take over the country, it provided funds and weaponry to them.⁷⁸¹ Haftar had struggled to secure political and military support in Libya since 2011, without success. In February 2014, he resurfaced and started creating an army by bringing together East

⁷⁷⁷ Libya Herald, "National Forces Alliance Sweeps Party Lists as Election Results Finally Announced," *Libya Herald*, 07/17/2012, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2012/07/17/national-forces-alliance-sweeps-party-lists-as-election-results-finally-announced/>; Nebahat Tanriverdi Yasar, "Al-Watiya Defeat Derailed UAE's Libya Plans," *Anadolu Agency*, 05/21/2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-al-watiya-defeat-derailed-uae-s-libya-plans/1849144>.

⁷⁷⁸ Wolfram Lacher, "Fault Lines of the Revolution Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya," Berlin, 2013, www.swp-berlin.org.

⁷⁷⁹ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷⁸⁰ David D. Kirkpatrick, Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.," *The New York Times*, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html>.

⁷⁸¹ Dario Cristiani, "The Zintan Militia and the Fragmented Libyan State," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 2012, <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-the-zintan-militia-and-the-fragmented-libyan-state/>.

Libyan tribal groups and the Gaddafi administration's ex-forces to create the Libyan National Army (LNA). Haftar pulled together his forces under the umbrella of an unapologetic war on Jihadists and terrorists and, in May 2014, initiated an offensive.⁷⁸²

Abu Dhabi established Al-Khadim Airbase sited around 106 miles from Benghazi, and since 2016 it has been supportive of the LNA.⁷⁸³ From the Al-Khadim Airbase, the UAE played a significant role in the LNA's advances by providing air support with its fighter jets and its fleet of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).⁷⁸⁴ Indeed, due in part to the UAE's support, the LNA was finally able to smash its adversaries in Benghazi in November 2017. Despite the weapons embargo on Libya since 2011, the UAE has reportedly expanded its arms exports to Haftar since 2017. President Obama has seen Abu Dhabi and Cairo's assistance to Haftar and his LNA as hampering political settlement to the Libyan crisis. His administration has also condemned, on many occasions, often bluntly, the UAE's repeated violation of the UN weapons embargo.⁷⁸⁵

Unlike Obama, though endorsing the internationally recognized Government of the National Accord (GNA) in Libya, Trump displayed little concern. In February 2019, Haftar exploited the inaction of Washington and growing support from Abu Dhabi and Cairo to gain control of Sabha and Awbari.⁷⁸⁶ However, the Trump administration abandoned Washington position in Libya in April 2019 when Washington tacitly supported Haftar's campaign in Tripoli.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸² Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."; Mahmut Rantisi, Emrah Kekilli, "Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'nin Dış Politikası," *SETA Analiz*, 2017.

⁷⁸³ "UN Team: UAE Is Developing Its Air Base in Eastern Libya," *Middle East Monitor*, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180302-un-team-uae-is-developing-its-air-base-in-eastern-libya/>.

⁷⁸⁴ Yasar, "Al-Watiya Defeat Derailed UAE's Libya Plans."

⁷⁸⁵ Declan Walsh, Eric Schmitt, John Ismay, "American Missiles Found in Libyan Rebel Compound," *The New York Times*, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/world/africa/libya-american-missiles.html>.

⁷⁸⁶ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

⁷⁸⁷ David D. KirkPatrick, "The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It," *The New York Times*, 04/14/2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/world/middleeast/libya-russia-john-bolton.html>; Fredric Wehrey, "Resurgent Russia: View From Libya - The Day After," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/09/view-from-libya-pub-82521>.

h. Alignment with Israel

To deal with the Iranian influence, especially in the Levant, Abu Dhabi and Israel normalized relations. On September 15, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan signed an agreement in Washington to normalize relations. Even before then, unofficial cooperation between Tel Aviv and the UAE developed in the economic and strategic planes, through the special services and even along the political line.⁷⁸⁸

The most important point on which the UAE leadership insists is the rejection of the government of Benjamin Netanyahu to annex part of the territory of the West Bank of the Jordan River and its consent to the formula “two states for two peoples.” However, and for the avoidance of doubt, Netanyahu has always been saying that annexation is not outside Israel’s plans; but that was simply postponed. While the Israeli prime minister is talking about the suspension of previously announced plans for annexation, and he has spoken about his consent to a Palestinian state before (for example, in his Bar-Ilan speech in October 2013).⁷⁸⁹ For the Emirates, the guarantees of Washington are important, which, by the way, does not rule out the supply of the latest F-35 fighters to this country in the framework of the political deal with Abu Dhabi.

An important factor in the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel is the threat perception of Tehran, as both countries share the threat of Iran. The threat from Iran has grown in recent years, materializing in such sensitive conflicts the UAE and the rest of the Arab Gulf states, such as in Syria and Yemen. The UAE regards Iran’s actions as confirmation of its expansionism and as the ability to create a serious threat to its interest. Having strengthened its position in Syria and the possibility of influencing the civil war in Yemen, Tehran moved to attack their interests directly. Such as the explosions of oil tankers in Emirati ports in 2019, a missile strike on Saudi oil refineries in September of the same year, among other things.

Apart from Iran’s threat perception as a driver for UAE Israel formal relations, the UAE perceives Ankara’s steadily increasing influence in the region. The UAE, in

⁷⁸⁸ Samuel Ramani, “Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties With The Gulf Monarchies ,” *HuffPost*, 12/09/2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-israel-is-strengthening_b_11946660.

⁷⁸⁹ Lahav Harkov, “Netanyahu Lowers Expectations for Israeli-Palestinian Peace ,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 10/07/2013, <https://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Netanyahu-puts-a-damper-on-Israeli-Palestinian-peace-process-at-2013-Bar-Ilan-speech-328052>.

particular, perceives Turkey as a threat because of its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. Given that the UAE feels threatened by MB and political Islam in general and that Turkey collaborates with Qatar and supports Islamist across the region and even supports the GNA in Libya against the LNA supported by Abu Dhabi, Ankara is treated as a threat which must be balanced at all cost.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Sunni monarchies to resist the growing military power of the pro-Iranian coalition and the Qatari-Turkish link in these conditions—especially Iran, which, like the monarchy, is actively opposed by Israel. The plans to combine their potentials and efforts in the name of survival look quite realistic in the context of their rejection of the nuclear deal of the world community with Iran. It is not surprising that long-standing and secret ties between Arab monarchies and Israel are coming to the surface now.

i. Maintenance of Extra-regional Alliance

Apart from internal and regional efforts to balance its threat perception of Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam and Iran, the UAE's regime also maintained its external alliance with the West and engaged in excessive lobbying. Abu Dhabi has strengthened its key military alliance with the USA owing to the rising influence of Iran in the Gulf and beyond. The US has since increased its presence in the UAE, sending more troops bases at Al Dhafra and Jebel Ali.⁷⁹⁰ From 2014, the UAE has participated with the US in a 'Joint Strategic Dialogue.' Moreover, Abu Dhabi took part in the US-GCC Summit at Camp David in May 2015, reaffirming Washington's assurance to the defence of the Gulf and pushing for a new policy alliance with both countries.⁷⁹¹ The United Arab Emirates also renewed its defence cooperation agreement with the United States to replace the 1994 treaty in 2019. The deal, which has the span of 15 years, will improve military coordination between Washington and Abu Dhabi, furthering the development of an already strong military, political and economic partnership and also presents the US military with the opportunity to better respond to a number of scenarios in and around the

⁷⁹⁰ Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy."

⁷⁹¹ Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies," pp. 95–112.

UAE. The security agreement will also boot the training of UAE military personnel by the US.⁷⁹²

The UAE being apprehensive of the Iran nuclear agreement, supported Trump's decision to pull out of the JCPOA in 2018. Indeed, the ambassador of the UAE to the US noted that *"Iran needs to stop its proliferation of ballistic missiles, end its support of violent proxies, cease plotting terrorist bombings and discontinue its incitement of sectarian and ethnic division."*⁷⁹³

Moreover, the UAE used lobbying as a tool to garner support for its balancing against its threat perceptions. Muhammad bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, has a great deal of influence in the West, given the link he forged while studying in Sandhurst Royal Military Academy in the 1970s. Mohammed bin Zayed is regarded as a "loyal and capable ally" in the US defence establishment.⁷⁹⁴ During the GCC involvement in Manama, the UAE leveraged its involvement in NATO operations against Gaddafi in Libya to influence the US government's position on their intervention in the Bahraini crisis. The US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, disparaged the Gulf states for sending the PSF to Bahrain. Indeed,

*"The Emiratis promptly threatened to withdraw from the coalition then being assembled to support a NATO-led strike against Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi... The Emiratis knew they were needed to give the coalition legitimacy. They quickly named their price for staying on board... Mrs. Clinton must issue a statement that would pull back from any criticism of the Bahrain operation."*⁷⁹⁵

Moreover, it lobbied the USA and many European countries to label MB and groups that may link them as terrorists. The UAE's policy, which is primarily prohibiting political Islam, was internationalized as Abu Dhabi's effort to counter extremism. For instance, the United Kingdom has been under pressure to outlaw numerous figures that

⁷⁹² "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy," 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

⁷⁹³ Yousef Al Otaiba, "UAE STATEMENT ON NEW IRAN SANCTIONS," *UAE Embassy in Washington, DC*, 2018, <https://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/uae-statement-new-iran-sanctions>.

⁷⁹⁴ Robert F. Worth, "Mohammed Bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future," *The New York Times*, 01/09/2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/magazine/united-arab-emirates-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>.

⁷⁹⁵ Helene Cooper, Robert F. Worth, "Arab Spring Proves a Harsh Test for Obama's Diplomatic Skill," *The New York Times*, 09/24/2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/us/politics/arab-spring-proves-a-harsh-test-for-obamas-diplomatic-skill.html>.

participate in political Islam and, more specifically, the MB, as a terrorist group since the country is considered a major hub for MB activities. Moreover, Abu Dhabi coordinated the intelligence services primarily and circulated MB misinformation in the media.⁷⁹⁶

In the United States, Abu Dhabi carried out a vigorous lobbying effort against the MB, asking the Trump administration to proscribe it as a terrorist group. In 2014, Abu Dhabi also listed two groups that represent Muslims in the US, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim American Society (MAS), to the terrorist list because of their link to the transnational political Islamic MB that the regime in the UAE sees a threat to its continued existence.⁷⁹⁷ The UAE's move to blacklist MB as terrorists was said to allow other American entities to condemn the MB and even campaigned against them.⁷⁹⁸ But the United Arab Emirates failed to persuade the Trump administration to proscribe the MB as a terrorist organization in the US as grassroots MB sympathizers campaigned against the UAE's effort.⁷⁹⁹

Abu Dhabi's Muhammad bin Zayed's clout in the West coupled with the rise of Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia helped the UAE successfully lobby Donald Trump to make his first foreign trip to the Gulf as the president of the US in 2017.⁸⁰⁰ The consequence was that Trump gave the Saudi axis the green light to take brutal actions on Iran and even blockade Qatar.⁸⁰¹ Earlier on, during his electioneering, Trump outlined a plan to take a tougher stance on Iran.⁸⁰² Moreover, the US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran resulted from UAE's excessive lobbying in Washington, which shows how Abu Dhabi's Muhammad bin Zayed influences the US. Furthermore, since 2011, the UAE has made great exertions to halt the re-export of sophisticated technology

⁷⁹⁶ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring.'"

⁷⁹⁷ Adam Taylor, "Why the U.A.E. Is Calling 2 American Groups Terrorists," *The Washington Post*, 11/18/2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/11/17/why-the-u-a-e-is-calling-2-american-groups-terrorists/>.

⁷⁹⁸ Khatib, "Arab Gulf States' Lobbying in the US in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings," p. 35.

⁷⁹⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰⁰ Kirkpatrick et al., "The Wooing of Jared Kushner: How the Saudis Got a Friend in the White House."

⁸⁰¹ Barnard, Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind - The New York Times."

⁸⁰² Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

to Iran, with corporations in the UAE levied by Washington's sanctions for their role in exporting weapons technology to Iran.⁸⁰³



⁸⁰³ El-Dessouki, Mansour, “Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab Emirates’ Policy towards Iran.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF BAHRAIN

I. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF BAHRAIN IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

1. IRAN

a. Bahrain and the Islamic Revolution

The Islamic revolution in Iran is seen as an existential threat to Bahrain for at least three interwoven reasons. The first is that Khomeini sees the kind of leadership in the Gulf as illegitimate and called for their overthrow. Shiite clerics in Bahrain had been in close touch with Khomeini during his exile in Iraq. Most worrisome was that many of the allegations Khomeini levied against the Shah can be just as well applicable to Bahraini rulers. The allegations include authoritarian leaders, the misuse of oil income for the minority rulers, dependence on and emulation of the West, inability to uphold the Islamic way of life, among other things. To that effect, Khomeini sent representatives to Bahrain to encourage uprisings, which will lead to revolution and the rise of Shiites to power. Because many religious leaders that were trained in Iran influenced the Bahraini Shiites, the call was heeded.⁸⁰⁴

Secondly, Bahrain has a majority downtrodden Shiite population which revolutionaries from Iran can exploit. The above, coupled with Iran's proximity to Bahrain, Khomeini was convinced that he could effortlessly export his revolution to Bahrain. Bahrain believed that Iranian incitement of revolt could topple its regime. Undeniably, Bahrain has become susceptible to subversion by the Islamic republic. As part of Iran's immediate neighbourhood ambitions, it created and supported many Shiites groups to that effect.

Moreover, through the Islamic Liberation Front of Bahrain (IFLB), Iran attempted to overthrow the Bahraini monarchy in 1981.⁸⁰⁵ The IFLB planned to replace the regime

⁸⁰⁴ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸⁰⁵ *ibid.*

in Bahrain with Iran-type.⁸⁰⁶ One interesting thing about the coup is that its plotters cut across Bahrain's boundaries but involved no single Iranian. This shows how effective the IFLB was in infiltrating Arabian Gulf societies.⁸⁰⁷ It is noteworthy that among the 73 people linked to the IFLB arrested given prison sentences, 60 of them were citizens of Bahrain, 11 were of Saudi origin, the rest are Kuwaiti and Omani.⁸⁰⁸ The detainees admitted they had “planned to seize Government House and take officials hostage, during Bahrain’s National Day celebrations Dec. 16.”⁸⁰⁹ According to officials in Bahrain, the IFLB members were trained in Iran, trafficked weapons, \$120,000 from Iran, and their possession is the Bahraini police uniform.⁸¹⁰ As a result, the threat emanating from Iran was felt by all states within the Gulf.⁸¹¹

Thirdly, the revolution brought the possibility of making Bahrain Iran’s 14th province which was to be decided by its parliament. Ayatollah Khomeini himself reasserted Shah’s claim on Bahrain soon after coming to power.⁸¹² Iran’s top officials like Ayatollah Sadeq Rohani called for the annexation of Bahrain in 1980.⁸¹³ Although Iran's government allayed this fear by denouncing Rohani’s statement as unofficial, it was nevertheless perceived as a threat to the ruling elite. Nevertheless, later in the same year, while addressing members of the provisional government in which Khomeini was in attendance, Rohani issued a serious threat to al-Khalifa. To him, “*Since the ruler of Bahrain oppresses the nation, does not abide by Islamic laws and confiscates the public wealth, we wrote to him and told him ‘If you do not want to stop oppressing the people and restore Islamic laws, we will call on the people to demand annexation to the Islamic government of Iran’...*”⁸¹⁴ Moreover, Rouhani convinced that Bahrainis would be happy

⁸⁰⁶ Hasan Tariq Alhasan, “The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, no. 4 (2011), pp. 603–17, doi:10.3751/65.4.15; Simon Mabon, “The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. XIX, no. 2 (2012).

⁸⁰⁷ Wright, “Iran’s Relations with Bahrain,” pp. 61–80.

⁸⁰⁸ Alhasan, “The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain,” pp. 603–17.

⁸⁰⁹ “Around the World; Bahrain, Charging Plot, Calls Iran Envoy Home,” *The New York Times*, (1981), <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/19/world/around-the-world-bahrain-charging-plot-calls-iran-envoy-home.html>.

⁸¹⁰ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸¹¹ Joseph Kostiner, *Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region*, Wiesbaden: Vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009.

⁸¹² Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸¹³ R. K. Ramazani, “The Emerging Arab-Iranian Rapprochement: Towards An Integrated U.S. Policy In The Middle East?” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1998), pp. 45–62, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.1998.tb00293.x.

⁸¹⁴ Christin Marschall, *Iran’s Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami*, *Iran’s Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

joining the Iranian union called for a referendum. Sheikh Khalifa vehemently rejected Rouhani's meddling in Bahrain's internal affairs. The head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) marked Manama as occupied by the United States, making Bahrain "a fair game for attack on the Americans" by the late 1980s.⁸¹⁵

Furthermore, while responding to the transfer of stinger missiles to Manama, Radio Tehran articulated that, "*Regimes like Bahrain's are too small to remain optimistic about their future security under US support while they continue their policy of supporting US forces and helping the enemies of Islam.*"⁸¹⁶

Frequent travel of the IFLB to meet with key Shiite scholars in Iran and its writings also suggest Iran's transcendence over the group. Moreover, the print and radio media in Iran granted the IFLB media coverage, thereby helping the group propagate its propaganda. In their propaganda messages, they often describe the Bahraini monarch as imperialist, Zionist and brutish in a semblance with how Iranian revolutionaries labelled the Shah.⁸¹⁷ Furthermore, many of the IFBL members received military training from the IRGC in Iran.⁸¹⁸ Iran was also providing cash and weapons to its proxies in Bahrain.⁸¹⁹ Certainly, and to this effect, an Iran sponsored coup was uncovered in 1981. The Bahrain coup conspiracy has led to a regional awareness that Iran uses proxy groups to continue its revolutionary goals against the Arab Gulf state rulers. While Iran's role in the coup plot was clandestine, the IFLBs embracing revolutionary ideology and their loyalty to Iran's supreme leader suggest Iranian links.

Moreover, Hadi al-Modarresi, Bahrain's Shirazi movement head is Iran's Supreme leaders' representative in Bahrain. Ayatollah Rohani aroused fear in Bahrain after declaring that the island was the 14th province of the Islamic Republic aided al-Modarresi.⁸²⁰ The above makes sense because it emphasizes how Iran seeks to achieve its end of the revolution in Bahrain. Below is the sequence of the collapsed plot,

⁸¹⁵ Rieger, "The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990."

⁸¹⁶ Itamar Rabinovich, Haim Shaked, *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, 1987.

⁸¹⁷ Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study," pp. 143–71.

⁸¹⁸ Alhasan, "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain," pp. 603–17.

⁸¹⁹ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸²⁰ Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

*“National Day, 16 December 1981, was zero-hour for the group’s planned demonstration and attack on government installations and officials. Simultaneously, Tehran Radio was to have urged people to rally around the group. Five Iranian hovercraft loaded with troops and equipment were standing by in the Iranian port of Bushehr to fly in support as soon as they received word that the attempted coup was underway.”*⁸²¹

The corollary of the coup plot brought the Gulf States together against the mutual threat they all face. The result was the establishment of the GCC which has since become an avenue of strengthening cooperation alongside collective security.⁸²² Certainly, these events made Bahrain a supporter of Iraq during its war with Iran. Bahrain found itself in a more difficult situation though its position was that of neutrality. Bahrain was fraught with internal destabilization due to its population character, which has a 70% Shia appeal for the Iranian revolution.

Moreover, Bahrain and the other Gulf states share no borders with Iraq and therefore perceives a lesser threat than Iraq. Iranian military victory over Iraq after capturing the Faw peninsula war alarming to Bahrain and the other GCC states as the war was apparently in favour of Tehran, which means it can effectively impose its will on Bahrain more easily. To this effect, Bahrain allowed Iraq to use its territory to launch an attack on Iran.⁸²³

b. Iran Claims Bahrain

Historically, the relations between Iran and Bahrain have been complicated by claims by Tehran of Bahrain as an integral part of the Iranian territory. Occasionally, Iranian politicians revived their claims which leads to another crisis in their relationship. The Iranian claim to Bahrain is because Bahrain was invaded by forces loyal to Shah Abbas I in 1602, and on the fact that the Al Khalifa family sometimes paid tribute to the Persian Empire. Since the early twentieth century, nationalists in Iran have been claiming Iran as theirs. When Britain signed a treaty with Saudi Arabia recognizing Bahrain’s

⁸²¹ Rieger, “The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990.”

⁸²² Wright, “Iran’s Relations with Bahrain,” p. 69.

⁸²³ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

sovereignty in 1927, Iran raised objections. Also, on its maps, Bahrain has been depicted as part of Iran. The Iranian Majlis has also enacted laws that may apply to Bahrain.⁸²⁴

Britain's move towards creating a federation of states of which Bahrain was to be part did not settle well with Iran under the Shah. The Shah sees the British action as a plan to deny Iran its claims over Bahrain.⁸²⁵ Soon after Britain publicized its departure from the Gulf, Iran reaffirmed its claim to Bahrain by writing to Britain in 1968.⁸²⁶ But, after a series of negotiations with Britain, the Shah compromised his position on Bahrain claim.⁸²⁷ It is noteworthy that the agreement with Britain and the UN for granting Bahrain independence served Iranian interest because it made it less likely that Bahrain join the Trucial federation envisaged by Britain which would have served as a political counterbalance to Iran.⁸²⁸

While Iran's claims on Bahrain is bygone, Tehran's media intermittently resurrect the claims. Moreover, some provocative statements have been made by prominent Iranians that have compounded Tehran's mistrust by the GCC.⁸²⁹ For example, in 2009, the head of the accountability of the Supreme Leader's office and former speaker of the Iranian Shura Council, Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, stated that Bahrain was "Iran's 14th province until 1970." This statement reverberated an editorial by Hussain Shariatmadari the Kayhan newspaper published on June 9, 2007, citing documents that indicated that Bahrain was part of Iranian territory until 40 years ago. The editorial continued that the island's independence from Iran was not legitimate. Shariatmadari, who is an advisor to the Iranian supreme leader, said that

"Bahrain is a special case among GCC countries in the Gulf because Bahrain is part of the Iranian territories and had been separated from Iran in light of an illegal settlement between the executed Shah and the governments of the United States and Britain. And the main demand for the Bahrain people is to return its

⁸²⁴ *ibid.*

⁸²⁵ Steven Wright, "Iran's Relations with Bahrain," *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and Its Arab Neighbours*, Palgrave MacMillan, n.d., p. 63.

⁸²⁶ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸²⁷ Roham Alvandi, "Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2010), pp. 159–77, doi:10.1080/13530191003794723.

⁸²⁸ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸²⁹ Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy," 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-policy-confusion-about-bahrain>.

province...to the motherland which is Islamic Iran. It is self-evident that Iran and the people of this separated province must not give up this ultimate right."⁸³⁰

Whereas the regime in Iran has formally disassociated itself from the provocative statements, the statements still make sense in warning the GCC states of what they may suffer in the case of a full-blown war in the Gulf.⁸³¹ Nevertheless, Bahrain sees the provocative comment by Nouri as a threat to its national security and as a reaction, halted natural gas talks it was holding with Iran.⁸³²

According to the balance of threat theory's lens, Iran possesses all and has used rhetoric, which made the Bahraini regime apprehensive of Iran's intentions towards it. Thus, while the material factors that constitute a threat to a state are active, it is the perceptive component that formed threats that always cause Bahrain to balance against Iran.

c. Iran's Meddling in Bahrain's internal Affairs, Crisis in the 1900s and the role of Hezbollah al-Bahrain

The fear of Bahrain also stems from the fact that many of its Shiite citizens that studied at Qom were brainwashed and employed to oppose the Bahrain al-Khalifa regime. Moreover, immediately after the Gulf war, an economic crisis rocked Bahrain due to the decline in the price of crude in the world market. As a result, protests, mainly from Bahrain's downtrodden Shiites calling for reform erupted. While the Shiite's marginalization and discrimination are true, Iran has played a key role in the protest's eruption.⁸³³

Manama responded by establishing an advisory forum, but that did not yield clear results as protesters' requests were far from being met. Abdulamir al-Jamri and Ali Salman, both Shia chaplain with links to the Islamic Republic of Iran, used religion as a political tool to ignite Shiites against Bahrain.⁸³⁴ As a result, violent protests and riots (in

⁸³⁰ Wikileaks, "BAHRAIN'S RELATIONS WITH IRAN, Cable: 08MANAMA528_a," (11/05/2019), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MANAMA528_a.html.

⁸³¹ Stephanie Cronin, Nur Masalha, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC States: Revolution to Realpolitik?" *London School of Economic and Political Science Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States*, no. 17 (2011), www.lse.ac.uk/LSEKP/.

⁸³² Christopher M Blanchard, "Iraq and U.S. Policy," (12/06/2019), www.crs.gov/%7C7-5700.

⁸³³ Louay Bahry, "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1997), pp. 42–57.

⁸³⁴ *ibid.*

1995) were accompanied by a disruption in Bahrain's energy industry and cost the Bahraini government about \$2.3 million.⁸³⁵ The government arrested Sheikh Abdul Amir al Jamri, and his arrest came with the loss of the lives of 18 people and 50 injured. One noteworthy thing about the demonstration is its ability to threaten Bahrain's political stability.⁸³⁶ This was especially evidenced as the Shiite groups began rebellious activities against the Bahraini state through blocking roads, attacking the police, markets etc.⁸³⁷

The Bahraini Hezbollah which was reportedly established in 1993 at Qom had a goal of creating at least 3,000 member group which should have political, military women sections among others, was in 1996 busted by the government of Bahrain for plots to overthrow the regime through an armed revolution and replace with a regime that will be pro-Iranian.⁸³⁸ While Iran declined any link to the group, the arrests and confessions made by those arrested showed a clear link. This link and the groups plan to overthrow the regime with Iran's "blessing" was also cited by Robert Pelletreau, a former US assistant secretary of state.⁸³⁹ Moreover, the suspects arrested confessed have received military training from Iran and Hezbollah of Lebanon under the command of the IRGC and also had a mission of gathering data on American troops stationed in Bahrain. Many of the members were conscripted one and a half year before the December 1994 protest erupted in Bahrain.⁸⁴⁰

As stated above, Bahrain's fear also stems from the fact that many of its Shiite citizens who studied at Qom were brainwashed and employed to oppose the Bahrain al-Khalifa regime. For example, the spiritual leader of the Wefaq Party in Bahrain, Sheikh Isa Qassim is Khamenei's agent in Bahrain saddled with the role of tax collection for Khamenei, spreading Khamenei's spiritual authority as well as urging Bahraini Shiites to follow Khamenei as their *Marjah at-taqlid*. Khamenei finds pride in Qassim's job and even designates him as "a star in Shia's sky". Likewise, Khamenei's fatwa office leader claimed that Khamenei believed that Qassim's political views and positions should be

⁸³⁵ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸³⁶ *ibid.*

⁸³⁷ Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 2011, <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>.

⁸³⁸ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸³⁹ Miriam Joyce, *Bahrain from the Twentieth Century to the Arab Spring*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

⁸⁴⁰ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

heeded to by Shiites.⁸⁴¹ While Bahraini authorities were unable to provide substantial evidence of Iran's funding or military assistance to Shi'a opposition aside from the one it provided in the 1990s,⁸⁴² the strong connection between Iranian and Shiites in Bahrain demonstrated how Iran has used its leverage against the regime in Bahrain.

d. Bahrain's Threat Perception of Iran in the 2000s

Bahrain also perceives threat from the build-up of Iran's military power and its nuclear program which is considered as the most important element in the militarization of its "strategic enemy". The threat perception stemming from Iran's nuclear programme can be seen from the Bahraini elites' utterances. In a leaked diplomatic cable, King Hamad was noted to have said, *"That program [Iran's nuclear programme] must be stopped,"* because *"The danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it."* At the same time, he advocated for *"forcefully for taking action to terminate (Iran's) nuclear program, by whatever means necessary."*⁸⁴³ While, the risk of Iran's nuclear program is not only that Iran, having created nuclear weapons, would possess an indisputable military advantage, the volatility of the consequences of the emergence of nuclear power plants close to the borders of Bahrain as that of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. The nuclear reactor in Bushehr is located on the Gulf, a source of water for the states in the region. In the event of leakage, a disaster will occur all the Gulf states.⁸⁴⁴

Furthermore, Iran's possession of offensive capability that translates to a stockpile of ballistic missiles in its inventory threatens Bahrain. Given that Iran's ballistic missiles are within reach of Manama, Bahrain, like its neighbours, is concerned about Tehran's ballistic missile coupled with its dubious nuclear programme. Iran's Shahab 3, Sejil, MRBM and Sourmar long-range cruise missile ranges of 2,000km, 2,000km and 2,500km respectively can comfortably hit Manama which is just 832km from Khorramabad where one of Iran's missile launch site (Imam Ali missile base) is located. According to a leaked

⁸⁴¹ Khalaji, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy."

⁸⁴² Wikileaks, "BAHRAIN'S RELATIONS WITH IRAN, Cable: 08MANAMA528_a."

⁸⁴³ Colvin, "Cut off Head of Snake Saudis Told U.S. on Iran."

⁸⁴⁴ Habib Toumi, "Kuwait Official Concerned over Iran Nuclear Plant's Safety," *Gulf News*, (2014), <https://Gulfnews.com/world/Gulf/kuwait/kuwait-official-concerned-over-iran-nuclear-plants-safety-1.1303730>.

cable, the al-Khalifa's are sincerely troubled by Iran's missiles because the missiles are placed to hit royal palaces and NAVCENT which are all located at Manama.⁸⁴⁵

2. Bahrain and the Iraqi Threat Perception

Iraq indeed possesses all the components of threat from aggressive intentions, offensive capability, to aggregate power to threaten Bahrain. However, unlike the threat Bahrain perceived from Iran, the Iraqi threat emanated mainly from its support for the Bahrain National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Popular Liberation Front of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) from the 1960s through the mid-70s. The NLF is a communist movement that was officially established in 1955 in Bahrain. Its establishment was said to have been inspired by relations with Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party in Iran. Activities among the groups culminated with an uprising in March 1965. The rebellion erupted when the local oil company announced plans to relieve many of its local workforce of their job. The uprising swirled to demonstrations across Bahrain, primarily in Manama and Muharraq within a short period.⁸⁴⁶ A new movement was born in the late 1960s, will eventually be consolidated under the banner of the PFLOAG to overthrow the regimes in the Gulf through violent means. PFLOAG became increasingly active in the Dhofar movement operating in Oman from 1965 to 1976, with several Bahraini officials actively involved with their Dhofari comrades. In 1974, PFLOAG of Bahrain was transformed into the Bahrain Liberation Front. While the groups were said to have received support from Iraq, they were able to establish stamping ground in Bahrain.⁸⁴⁷ The PFLOAG, a key target of Bahraini security correspondingly made an effort to overthrow the Bahraini regime in 1979.⁸⁴⁸ This said, it is important to note that while Iraq supported these groups, its support was almost ineffective as both Sunni and Shiite groups in Bahrain were opposed to Iraq.⁸⁴⁹

Furthermore, Iraq became a potential threat to Bahrain during the Gulf war because of Bahrain's strong support for the United Nations coalition, its participation in

⁸⁴⁵ Wikileaks, "BAHRAIN'S RELATIONS WITH IRAN, Cable: 08MANAMA528_a."

⁸⁴⁶ Omar Al-Shehabi, "Political Movements in Bahrain: Past, Present, and Future," 2012, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25261>.

⁸⁴⁷ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸⁴⁸ Al-Shehabi, "Political Movements in Bahrain: Past, Present, and Future."

⁸⁴⁹ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

the Gulf War, and its support for the enforcement of all UN resolutions against Iraq. Bahrain hosted 17,500 American soldiers and 250 fighter aircraft at Sheikh Isa Air Base during operations desert storm in 1991.⁸⁵⁰ While there was no point for Iraq to single out Bahrain for revenge over its support of foreign forces against it or presents a direct military threat to Bahrain,⁸⁵¹ Saddam fired nine Scud missiles into Bahrain.⁸⁵²

B. BAHRAIN'S BALANCING STRATEGIES

1. Internal Balancing Strategies: Armament (MILEX and Arms Transfers)

Bahrain's armament is by far lower than that of the UAE or Saudi Arabia. One of the reasons could be attributed to the lack of adequate fund to spend on armament. As stated, earlier, Bahrain relies on Saudi Arabia for cash accruing from crude. Yet, Bahrain's spending on arms has increased since its independence, (see table 12, below) which can be attributed to the threats it perceived from mainly its external environment. During the Iran-Iraq War, the regional situation was then filled with political and ideological threats as well as major strategic and military threats. The Bahrain Defence Force is primarily concerned with preserving internal stability and securing the coasts of Bahrain. In the 1980s as the Iran-Iraq War continues, Bahrain increased its military size and added new weaponry to its stockpile. Compared to the decade before the threat of the Iranian revolution and its war in Iraq, there was an increase from \$1,409.52 billion to \$3,151 billion (i.e., a rise of 123.6%) in the 1980s. According to the SIPRI MILEX data, in 1980, Bahrain's defence budget increased from \$299 million to \$316 million (5.7 per cent). In the decade, Bahrain's military expenditure peaked with an investment of \$463 million in 1982.

Table 12: Bahrain's Military Expenditure from 1971-2020.

	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020	Total
MILEX	1,409.2	3,151	4,417	7,767	14,009	30,753.2
% Change		123.6	40.2	75.8	70.5	

Data source: SIPRI MILEX.

⁸⁵⁰ Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," 2019, p. 31, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

⁸⁵¹ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸⁵² Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," p. 31.

Bahrain's arms import comes from various sources with the US as its leading arms supplier. The US has transferred \$1,739 million of Bahrain's \$2,664 million total since 1971. This transfer accounts for 65.3% of the total arms Manama imported since its independence. Bahrain regarded its purchases of arms from the United States as a form of protection (**see table 13 below**). In 2006, a leaked classified document suggested that the King of Bahrain commended the US's weapons to Bahrain through the FMF. Stressing that some states, in terms of price and quality, might be able to contest the arms from the United States, he considers the US support as unparalleled.⁸⁵³ Other sources of Bahrain's arms include Germany, the UK, and France with a supply of \$363m (13.6%), \$138m (5.2%) and \$114m (4.3%) respectively (**See table 13 below**).

Table 13: Arms Transfers from top suppliers to Bahrain from 1971-2020.

	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020	Total	%
US	1	702	707	219	110	1,739	65.3
Germany	4	357	2	-	-	363	13.6
UK	12	13	-	85	28	138	5.2
France	23	52	18	17	3	114	4.3

Data source: SIPRI TIV. Figures expressed in million USD

In the 1980s, Bahrain imported many weapons, including fighter jets, portable SAM, APC, anti-tank missiles, etc. In a \$114 million deal with the US, Bahrain ordered 6 F-5 fighter crafts with 60 sidewinder missiles. Moreover, it ordered six more F-5 in a \$92m deal in 1986 and received in 1987. Owing to its diminishing oil revenue, Bahrain has less security capital than affluent Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Between 1984 and 1994, the GCC granted Bahrain and Oman \$1.8 billion in aid. Bahrain used the aid to buy new funding support from Saudi Arabia to acquire 12 F-16 jets in 1990. The delivery of 70 stinger missiles was made to Manama in 1988 as part of a \$7.1m deal with the US. Some of the deals in 1990 include a \$50m contract for the supply of 9 Self-propelled M-270 MRL which was ordered in 1990 and delivered in 1992. In 1990, in a \$37 m deal, the US transferred some 27 M60A3 Patton-2 Tanks delivered in 1991. Between 1995 and 1997, the US has handed over some 40 MIM-23B HAWK SAM. Under the Excess Defense Articles (EDA), Bahrain has received aids from the US, which is above \$400 million

⁸⁵³ Jodi Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement," 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Vittori_Bahrain_final.pdf.

since its inception in 1993. Additionally, in a five-year lease agreement, the US supplied Bahrain with 50 M-60A3 tanks for free. The US also transferred Perry Frigate to Bahrain in a \$64 million EDA in 1997.⁸⁵⁴ Likewise, in 1998, Bahrain acquired ten new American F-16C aircraft worth about \$303 million. Then Bahrain acquired 12 more of these aircraft, bringing its F-16 group to 22 units. In 1999, the US and Bahrain signed a \$110m deal to deliver 26 AIM-120B AMRAAM BVRAAM in 2000.

In August 2000, Bahrain acquired 30 Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMs), short-range ballistic missiles with a range of 165 kilometres in a \$70 million deal with the US. According to the agreement, the weapon is to be controlled by the Americans to prevent missile technology leakage. In 2002, deliveries from the United States of 30 high-precision non-nuclear ATACMS, under joint American-Bahrain control, began.⁸⁵⁵ In a \$44 m deal, signed in 2004, a TPS-59 Air search radar was delivered to Bahrain in 2007. From 2007-2008, the United States provided 180 Javelin anti-tank missile systems in a \$42 million deal signed in 2006 to Bahrain, nine UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters at an estimated price of \$252 million, six Bell Search and Recovery helicopters worth about \$160 million.⁸⁵⁶ Bahrain purchased six Hawk 129 aircraft from the UK in 2005 and was shipped in 2006. With the transfer, a rise in weapons from the UK is noticed.⁸⁵⁷

2. External Balancing Strategies

a. *Bahrain's regional alignment in the period of regional turmoil (Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War)*

From its independence, it relied on the protection of foreigners. It later built its military and engaged in arms procurements. However, due to its limited size and resources, it was unable to build a strong military to deter the threat in its external milieu. Moreover, due to its lack of adaptability to the plight of the masses who in most cases, constitute a majority Shia, it failed in finding a permanent solution to the crisis in its

⁸⁵⁴ Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," pp. 19-20.

⁸⁵⁵ "Proposed ATACMS Sale to Bahrain Announced," *Arms Control Association*, 2000, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-10/news-briefs/proposed-atacms-sale-bahrain-announced>; Anthony H Cordesman, Michael Peacock, "The Changing Security Balance in the Gulf Joint and Asymmetric Warfare, Missiles and Missile Defense, Civil War and Non-State Actors, and Outside Powers," 2015, www.rowman.com.

⁸⁵⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman, Michael Peacock, "Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Now Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance," 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150428_Gulfarmssales.pdf.

⁸⁵⁷ Nazanin Soroush, "Bahraini Militant Support," *IHS Markit*, 2018, <https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/Bahraini-militant-support.htm>

internal environment. Therefore, Manama relied on the security umbrella of Saudi Arabia and the GCC heavily for its security and stability. Bahrain's balancing strategy is more of bandwagoning where it joins Saudi Arabia on almost every issue, whether it is in its interest or not if that will guarantee its survival. Its balancing strategies go hand in hand with that of its regional guarantor at a time balancing Iran with Iraq and vice versa. During the Iran-Iraq War, Bahrain bandwagoned with Saudi Arabia to support Iraq; however, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Manama balanced Iraq with the help of foreigners and Iran. Moreover, Bahrain also views more cooperation with the rest of the states in the Arab Gulf as a form of security for its stability and survival.

Bahrain reached a defence agreement with Saudi Arabia in December 1981 shortly after reports surfaced of an attempted coup linked to the Tehran-linked Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, whilst the UAE and the other Gulf monarchs signed agreements on security cooperation and the exchange of information with Saudi Arabia in 1982. Also, with Muscat, Manama signed a maritime security accord on ships traversing the Strait of Hormuz the same year.⁸⁵⁸

Bahrain has the weakest military capability in the Gulf. Since its independence, Bahrain relied heavily on the protection of external powers, which is why it failed to develop its military to deter an external threat. By 1980 when the Iran-Iraq War started, Bahrain's total capability was some 2,500 troops with \$135 million as defence budget. Another explanation for that, lies in the fact that Bahrain does not have extra cash to develop its deterrent forces. Bahrain's GDP as of 1979 was \$1.76 billion, while that of the UAE and Saudi Arabia stood at \$12 billion and \$94.66 billion, respectively. Therefore, it has no leverage like Saudi Arabia or the UAE that have extra money from crude sale.⁸⁵⁹

Saudi Arabia has long served as Bahrain's regional protector, whose role is at most supplemented by the rest of the GCC states. Saudi Arabia has as well propped up the Bahraini economy. Oil production in Bahrain depends primarily upon Saudi Arabia's generosity. Bahrain receives half of the Abu Safah oil field's net profits, accounting for

⁸⁵⁸ Ulrichsen, "The Realignment of Regional Politics and the Future of the Gulf Cooperation Council," pp. 49–68.

⁸⁵⁹ "The Middle East and North Africa," pp. 39–50.

around 50 to 67% of Bahrain's total income.⁸⁶⁰ When unrest broke out in Bahrain in 1994, Saudi Arabia sent its army to support the regime in dealing with the unrest. Moreover, Bahrain relies on Saudi Arabia for oil from the Abu Safa field to support its economy.⁸⁶¹

Walt stated that weak states have the tendency of bandwagoning than balancing as bandwagoning is more often resorted to, in case of a threat of a much superior enemy.⁸⁶² Bahrain's joining of the Saudi led GCC during the Iran-Iraq War can be seen as a bandwagoning strategy. Bahrain's reason for joining the Saudi-led GCC in 1981 can be illustrated by the regime's worries about the expansion of internal turmoil that rocked Bahrain since the revolution.⁸⁶³ Nevertheless, Bahrain's position on Iran oscillates around reacting strongly and remarkably conciliatory, especially when claims to Bahrain territories are made by Iran. A more recent example is how Bahrain suspended negotiations over natural gas purchases from Iran when one of Khamenei's adviser declared that Bahrain was Iran's fourteenth province in 2009. Simultaneously, in 2009, Bahrain's government ordered the closure of a newspaper for publishing an article condemning Iran and its political system. However, while Bahrain hosts the United States Fifth Fleet, it has affirmed that it will never allow its land to be used for operations against Iran.⁸⁶⁴

The discussion about Bahrain corresponds to Walt's argument that weak states are likely to opt for bandwagoning due to their lack of capacity to alter the balance effectively. How vulnerable Bahrain is vis-à-vis its main external threats has been illustrated above. Consequently, it is reasonable for Bahrain to choose the side that is likely to win and bandwagon with a strong power that has a stake in its security. What explains Bahrain's bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia via the GCC was not the fear of a military invasion or war with Iran but its fears which emanated from the unrest that ensued after the Iranian revolution.⁸⁶⁵ As Gerd Nonneman succinctly puts it, "Bahrain... had

⁸⁶⁰ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁸⁶¹ Eman Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring," *The International Spectator*, 2017, doi:10.1080/03932729.2017.1309101.

⁸⁶² *ibid.* p. 17.

⁸⁶³ Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies," p. 33.

⁸⁶⁴ Marina Ottaway, "Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy," 2009, www.CarnegieEndowment.org/.

⁸⁶⁵ Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies," p. 33.

shifted somewhat in the direction of the Saudi position—which may be explained by its own experience with Iranian- inspired protest, and the island’s high degree of dependence on Saudi aid, oil supplies, and military protection.”⁸⁶⁶

b. Bahrain’s Reliance on Extra-regional Protection

Bahrain relies heavily on stronger nations such as Britain and the US for its security. This pattern started with its protectorate status under Britain since the early 19th century. As Britain pulled out of Bahrain when Bahrain became independent in 1971, the United States became Bahrain’s security patron. Concerns about regional security were what made Manama signed the Juffair agreement in December 1971. Under the agreement, the US established a temporary navy at the erstwhile English base.⁸⁶⁷ It is noteworthy that since 1949, the U.S. has operated the Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR), which is a small naval base that has a flagship and two rotationally assigned destroyers in the Gulf.⁸⁶⁸

Bahrain was sceptical about the US naval presence because there is a sense of vulnerability the regime felt from its population for hosting foreign troops on its territory. Yet, the regime sees American military presence as a form of guarantee to its survival. Therefore, after attaining independence, Bahrain decided to maintain the presence of the MIDEASTFOR. Considering the threats around Bahrain, it concretized its defence ties with the US after Iraq’s aggression on Kuwait in 1991. Also, it stepped up its defence expenditure to meet its need for an advanced weapons system to “secure its regime”.

Bahrain participation during the liberation of Kuwait by the coalition forces can be regarded as a bandwagoning strategy, where it went along with the US in order to balance the threat emanating from Iraq. Although Bahrain’s participation is limited to a naval base and a centre for allied air forces,⁸⁶⁹ its role costs it approximately \$2 billion,

⁸⁶⁶ Gerd Nonneman, “The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities,” *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2004, pp. 167–92, doi:10.1057/9781403980427_9.

⁸⁶⁷ Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing*, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

⁸⁶⁸ David E. Long, *The Gulf: An Introduction to Its People, Politics, and Economics*, New York: Routledge, 2019.

⁸⁶⁹ “Bahrain - Gulf War,” (11/08/2019), <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-1065.html>.

exceeding Bahrain's military expenditure by more than \$50 million.⁸⁷⁰ After the war, a dual containment was put in place, sanction on Iraq which brought economic hardship and the no-fly zone on Iraq meant that the threat Bahrain and the rest of the Gulf states faced from Iraq ceases existing.⁸⁷¹

The aftermath of operation desert storm increased the US involvement in the region. In the case of Bahrain, the US entrenched its stay by maintaining a permanent naval force.⁸⁷² In October 1991, immediately after the Gulf war, Bahrain entered into a 10-year bilateral DCA with Bahrain.⁸⁷³ The content of this agreement is classified. However, Americans gained access to bases while Bahrain gains security protection from the US.

The relationship between Bahrain and the US metamorphosed to become more formal in 1995, with Manama becoming the operational headquarter of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet.⁸⁷⁴ Prior to the DCA, the US Navy in Bahrain was offshore on the Bahraini harbour. Apart from the fifth fleet, the US Naval forces central command, the Destroyer Squadron Fifty and three Combined Maritime Forces - Combined Task Force 150, 151, and 152, behind maritime security and counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and security and cooperation in the Gulf, respectively. They are all situated at the Naval Support Activity, Bahrain.⁸⁷⁵ These security relations of strategic importance followed a historical pattern of the kingdom's security relations with outsiders. There are over 7,000 American soldiers stationed in Bahrain, mainly the 5th Fleet of the navy.⁸⁷⁶

In March 2002, the United States granted Bahrain the status of a "main non-NATO ally." The indicated status allows Bahrain to acquire certain US weapons, use the Excess Defence Article (EDA) programs and participate in defence research cooperation with the United States. Otherwise, it would not be allowed.⁸⁷⁷ In 2006, a leaked classified document suggested the King of Bahrain emphasized the crucial role of US forces in

⁸⁷⁰ Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*.

⁸⁷¹ Cronin, Masalha, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC States: Revolution to Realpolitik?"

⁸⁷² Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History Since the First World War*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

⁸⁷³ Joyce, *Bahrain from the Twentieth Century to the Arab Spring*.

⁸⁷⁴ Steven Wright, *The United States and Gulf: The Foundations of The War on Terror*, 2007.

⁸⁷⁵ Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," p. 31.

⁸⁷⁶ Nurettin Kurt, "The US Occupied Middle East," (01/13/2020), <https://uwidata.com/4007-the-us-occupied-middle-east/>.

⁸⁷⁷ Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," p. 31.

maintaining Bahrain's stability in the region. For him, "*We feel we are protected by your presence ... Without you, we would be squashed.*"⁸⁷⁸ Also, Bahrain has official relations with NATO in the 2004 Istanbul Cooperation Initiative framework addressed to the GCC. Like other members of this initiative, Bahrain opened a unique mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels.⁸⁷⁹

The DCA signed between Bahrain and the US granted rights to the US to establish its bases on Bahraini territory. Currently, there are three US military bases located in Bahrain. The main naval base is the Naval Support Activity, Sheikh Isa Airbase and the Al-Muharraq base.⁸⁸⁰ Bahrain is one of the oldest Arab and Gulf countries that cooperated militarily with the United States. In 1971, the two sides signed an agreement during which Bahrain provided facilities for the US Navy. And in 1991 they signed a defence cooperation agreement that stipulated greater facilities to American forces and the right to pre-position their equipment.

II. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES OF BAHRAIN SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A. THREAT PERCEPTIONS

1. Bahrain's Domestic Vulnerabilities

Bahrain experienced more demonstrations than any other state in the Gulf given its economic weakness and its demography of marginalised Shiite majority ruled by a minority Sunni regime. But Bahraini average's economic status remains well above that of other Arab states such as Jordanians and Moroccans that experienced less demonstrations. It is also noteworthy that wellbeing in Libya was not able to stop widespread demonstrations. There have been several demonstrations motivated by

⁸⁷⁸ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁸⁷⁹ Cuneyt Yenigun, "Gulf Security, NATO and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative," *NATO'S Approach to Gulf Cooperation: Lessons Learned and Future Challenges*, ed. by Firuz Demir Yaşamış, Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2015, p. 36.

⁸⁸⁰ Wallin, "U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East," 2018.

joblessness, particularly among the youth. Conversely, in the GCC states, both of these variables are lessened than non-petroleum-producing Middle East countries.⁸⁸¹

Just days after Hosni Mubarak's resignation, coinciding with the mobilizations in other Arab countries, the first Bahraini demonstrations were called. The Bahraini uprising started on 14 February 2011 at Pearl Square when anger over social inequalities, whimsical detention of many government opponents, and police brutality against Shiites fuelled nationwide demonstrations.⁸⁸² Of note is that before the 2011 uprising, there have been series of protests in Bahrain.⁸⁸³ The Arab Uprisings protest was timed to coincide with the next anniversary of the declaration in 2002 of the National Action Charter, which authorized the adoption of a new constitution; according to which Bahrain becomes a constitutional monarchy. Initially, the protest was mainly non-sectarian with numerous calls for reform of the Bahraini government, slowly becoming sectarian as the protest progressed.⁸⁸⁴

Bahrain has long marginalized its majority Shia population which led to socio-economic problems in the country. However, beyond the socio-economic problems, the protests in Bahrain revolved around political reform. It should be recalled that Shiites dislike of the regime is not associated with meddling by Tehran as the regime claims, but due to economic imbalance and the absence of political agency, which was expanded and reiterated by the constitutional changes of 2002 (a reaction to years of democratic transition demands).

A new charter was adopted pledging to create a new parliament similar to the ones abolished in the 1975 by the Emir. The National Charter was put to voting in February 2001 and was approved by 98.4% of the 90% of eligible electorate participated.⁸⁸⁵ However, the changes proved to be cosmetic; it offered the impression of change, yet the regime had retained its control, much to the grief of political adversaries. As Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright rightly noted, "*the 2002 constitution safeguarded the traditional rule of the Al Khalifa and prevented the parliament from*

⁸⁸¹ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," pp. 327.

⁸⁸² Joyce, *Bahrain from the Twentieth Century to the Arab Spring*.

⁸⁸³ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," pp. 313–40.

⁸⁸⁴ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁸⁸⁵ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Steven Wright, "Political Change in the Arab Oil Monarchies: From Liberalization to Enfranchisement," *International Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 5 (2007), p. 919, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2007.00662.x.

making any change towards fulfilling the opposition's demand that the Majlis Al Shura have no legislative capacity if comprised of appointed officials."⁸⁸⁶

Furthermore, Shiites are often irked by the presence of huge number of foreign workers in Bahrain. Since its independence, the country's foreign workers soared, reducing the percentage of Bahraini workers from 83% in the early 1970s to 66% in only twenty years. It generated rivalry in the 1990s with the poor Shiites searching for jobs, and the regime failed to mitigate the pressure. As of 2013, the Bahraini private sector is dominated by 81% foreigners.⁸⁸⁷

Moreover, compared to the Shiites, the Sunnis have a higher mean salary, which gave them the opportunity and resources to retain control, while and the impact of economic downturn hits on the Shiites.⁸⁸⁸ The opposition accused the authorities that Bahraini citizenship is a tool used to increase the number of loyal citizens of Sunni origin, including politically trustworthy foreigners enlisted in the armed forces or state security organs.

The grievance of the groups protesting included the adoption of a constitution agreed upon, the release of political prisoners, the ending of discrimination against Shiites and the abolishment of sanction citizenship for political reasons. In favour of it, the people of Bahrain took to the streets in Manama to congregate in the Pearl Roundabout. From then on, clashes spread between the security forces and different groups of protesters. Among these, it is worth highlighting the case of those grouped in a coalition of both Shia and Sunni groups (i.e., the National Islamic Society (al-Wefaq), and even the National Democratic Labour Action Society (Wa'ad), a liberal Sunni group), that advocated the establishment of a true constitutional monarchy as its main demand, followed by the need to constitute a constituent assembly that would give life to a new constitution and the holding of elections for a parliament with real legislative powers.

Bahrain is the only country in the Gulf to witness popular protests to overthrow the regime of its ruling family, the Al-Khalifah. As the protests continue, the use of force

⁸⁸⁶ Ehteshami, Wright, "Political Change in the Arab Oil Monarchies: From Liberalization to Enfranchisement," p. 919.

⁸⁸⁷ Françoise De Bel-Air, "Demography, Migration, and the Labour Market in Bahrain," 2015.

⁸⁸⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*, New York: Routledge, 2018; Downs, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain," pp. 215-216.

to disperse the demonstrators by the security forces led to many.⁸⁸⁹ The Bahraini security forces rid the area of protests violently on 17 February 2011, rendering four civilians losing their lives.⁸⁹⁰ The use of force to disperse the protest and as a result, the death of several of many people radically changed the situation.⁸⁹¹

With the brutality of the security personnel increasing, requests of demonstrators escalated from the search for good governance to request the dismissal of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman, the Prime Minister and also pressed for an end to the regime. One can cite the case of more radical Shia groups the Movement for Liberty and Democracy (Haq), al-Wafa' Islamic Party and the Bahrain Freedom Movement based in the UK days after the demonstrations began formed an alliance called Coalition for the Bahraini Republic that even advocates for silently ending of the monarchy. "The coalition believes that the main demand of the popular revolution is the downfall of the current oppressive regime and the establishment of a democratic republic that expresses the desires of the people and protects its dignity, interests and rights."⁸⁹²

Furthermore, Tehran's meddling in the internal affairs of Manama, via supporting the Shiites has inspired even the Sunnis to make their demands.⁸⁹³ While the regime and its allies have often cited Tehran's meddling in the domestic affairs of Manama as the cause of the protest, the uprising in Bahrain should be linked to the oppressive actions of the regime against the Shiites. Manama has less oil income than the other Arab Gulf regimes to appease its majority Shiites, making it vulnerable, especially during economic distress. In contrast, the inadaptable regime struggles to remain in power. Since the regime's overall concern is to maintain control, having a majority downtrodden Shia population and a parliament that did not measure up to its goals rendered Manama exposed, in the view of the ruling family, to interference from Tehran.⁸⁹⁴

⁸⁸⁹ Joyce, *Bahrain from the Twentieth Century to the Arab Spring*.

⁸⁹⁰ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," p. 323.

⁸⁹¹ Joyce, *Bahrain from the Twentieth Century to the Arab Spring*.

⁸⁹² Robin Wigglesworth, "Coalition Wants Bahrain Monarchy Ousted," *Financial Times*, 03/09/2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/ea5e9446-49bf-11e0-acf0-00144feab49a>.

⁸⁹³ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," pp. 313–40.

⁸⁹⁴ Downs, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain," pp. 203–37.

2. External Threat Perceptions

a. Iran

Statements made by politicians in Tehran, particularly parliamentarians, regarding Tehran's sovereign rights over Bahrain and the past Shia unrest in Bahrain against the regime have rendered the Bahraini leadership wary of Tehran's interference and allegiance of its Shiites to Iran.⁸⁹⁵ Bahrain considers Tehran to be a serious threat and considers every internal or Shi'ite unrest a divisive Tehran-inspired attack, evidence of its implicitly increasing influence across the Gulf.⁸⁹⁶

While Tehran embraced the autonomy of Bahrain as a sovereign nation in 1971, many governments provocative statements are still expressed while publicly proclaiming interventions against the monarchy. In reality, the Bahraini revolts have provided Iran with the leverage to foster its desire to transform the segment of Bahrain's population by helping Shia people in the Gulf against naturalization policies.⁸⁹⁷ Tehran has been suspected of being responsible for the rebellion and plans to overthrow the regime in Bahrain. According to Jason Rivera, Tehran has sought "to replicate the success of Hezbollah's operations in Lebanon, through the introduction of a split-off branch of the organization [...] intent to support operations in Shia populated areas, not only in Bahrain, but also in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia."⁸⁹⁸

In addition, there is Iranian funding to Bahrain's dissenting movements such as al-Wefaq and Wa'ad, which were expected to be the most popular political societies after the 2010 elections.⁸⁹⁹ However, al-Wefaq was disbanded by the tribunal, which accused

⁸⁹⁵ Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms," pp. 94–95.

⁸⁹⁶ Yoel Guzansky, "Strategic Hedging by Non-Great Powers in the Gulf," *Great Powers and Geopolitics International Affairs in a Rebalancing World*, New York: Springer, 2015, pp. 241.

⁸⁹⁷ Sayel Al-Serhan, Ahed A. Mashagbeh, Mohammed Salameh, "Challenges Facing National Security in the Arab Gulf States: A Case Study of Challenges Facing National Security in the Arab Gulf States: A Case Study of Bahrain," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 7, no. March (2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322466366_Challenges_Facing_National_Security_in_the_Arab_Gulf_States_A_Case_Study_of_Bahrain; Sofie Hamdi, Mohammad Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States," *Asian Politics and Policy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2020), pp. 127–52, doi:10.1111/aspp.12528.

⁸⁹⁸ Jason Rivera, "Iran's Involvement in Bahrain Iran's Involvement in Bahrain: A Battleground as Part of the Islamic Regime's Larger Existential Conflict.," *Small Wars Journal*, 03/11/2015, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/iran's-involvement-in-bahrain>.

⁸⁹⁹ Daniel Wickham, "Bahrain's Elections and the Exclusion of the Political Opposition," *Middle East Centre*, 11/22/2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/11/22/bahrains-elections-and-the-exclusion-of-the-political-opposition/>.

the political society of “undermining the state, spreading sectarianism, and having connections to “terrorist” activities.”⁹⁰⁰ The group’s link with Iran was further seen when late Qassim Soleimani, then the commander of Iran’s Quds forces threatened Bahrain as a result of its actions against Sheikh Isa Qassim. According to Soleimani,

*“The Al Khalifa surely know their aggression against Sheikh Isa Qassim is a red line that crossing it would set Bahrain and the whole region on fire, and it would leave no choice for people but to resort to armed resistance...Al Khalifa will definitely pay the price for that and their blood-thirsty regime will be toppled.”*⁹⁰¹

Moreover, the al-Ashtar Brigades swore allegiance to Khamenei while rebranded its emblem to imitate the IRGC and Hezbollah in January 2018. It also declared that it has a key task in Iran’s resistance axis, a web of proxies controlled by Iran whose aim is to subvert the Gulf states and US interests in the region. Al-Ashtar Brigades was founded in 2013 with the primary goal of opposing the al-Khalifahs in Bahrain. According to the US State Department, members of the al-Ashtar obtained Iranian arms and were trained in Iraq camps sponsored by the IRGC.⁹⁰²

Bahrain feared that Iran had taken advantage of the turmoil and set up several proxies that act like political movements but had secret missions to implement Iran's geopolitical agenda.⁹⁰³ The proxies started to instigate the Shiites to protest while demanding change, which happened to coincide with the Arab Spring.⁹⁰⁴ Like the other GCC members, Bahrain also attributed the uprising to Irani interference in its domestic affairs. Manama accused Tehran of orchestrating demonstrations in 2011, by galvanizing the Shiites to pose threats to the regime by way of social media. This conjecture was proved by the finding that internet operations within Shia areas have multiplied, amid the Bahraini regime’s Internet shutdown.⁹⁰⁵ In addition to protests, after

⁹⁰⁰ Al Jazeera, “Bahrain Dissolves Main Shia Opposition Al-Wefaq Party,” *Al Jazeera*, 07/17/2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/17/bahrain-dissolves-main-shia-opposition-al-wefaq-party>.

⁹⁰¹ “Bahrain Strips Sheikh Isa Qassim of Nationality,” *Al Jazeera*, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/bahrain-strips-religious-leader-nationality-160620122338238.html>.

⁹⁰² Rikar Hussein, “US Adds Iran-Backed Bahraini Militant Group to Terror List,” *VOA News*, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/us-adds-iran-backed-bahraini-militant-group-terror-list>.

⁹⁰³ Rivera, “Iran’s Involvement in Bahrain Iran’s Involvement in Bahrain: A Battleground as Part of the Islamic Regime’s Larger Existential Conflict.”

⁹⁰⁴ Bassiouni et al., “Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.”

⁹⁰⁵ Rivera, “Iran’s Involvement in Bahrain Iran’s Involvement in Bahrain: A Battleground as Part of the Islamic Regime’s Larger Existential Conflict.”

an explosives factory in the capital was uncovered, Manama even suspected Tehran of promoting terrorism in its territory.⁹⁰⁶ Therefore, in April 2011, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, Bahrain's minister of foreign affairs, stressed, "*we have never seen such a sustained campaign from Iran on Bahrain and the Gulf as we've seen in the past two months.*"⁹⁰⁷

Bahrain's persistent accusation of Iran's meddling in its internal affairs through arming and supporting Shiites is consistent with the US State Departments report on international terrorism whereby Iran provided weapons, funding, and training for terrorist groups in Bahrain. According to Nathan Sales,

*"Iran is working constantly to undermine its neighbors in the Gulf. In Bahrain, Tehran has developed a close partnership with the al-Ashtar Brigades – an organization working to overthrow the Bahraini government. Iran provides al-Ashtar with training, funding, and weapons, enabling the group's terrorist attacks."*⁹⁰⁸

In the years after the uprising in Bahrain, there was a resurgence of threat from Tehran as the regime in Bahrain perceived it to be a catalyst for chaos. Although Tehran refuted the accusations and tried to pin Washington and its allies in the area for fomenting dispute among Muslims, its reputation as a troublemaker became greater as the Arab Uprisings became open sectarian strife.⁹⁰⁹ Indeed Iran has been against the GCC's PSF response in Bahrain while regarding it to be an unacceptable initiative from Riyadh.⁹¹⁰

Furthermore, a combined security operation of Manama and Muscat found proof of a Bahrain-based cell charged with funding, hiring, and looking for where to keep arms in Bahrain in 2013. At the same time, Bahrain confiscated an Iranian vessel

⁹⁰⁶ Hamdi, Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States," pp. 127–52; Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism," *Chantham House*, no. September (2018), pp. 1–19, <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/mideastr.pdf>.

⁹⁰⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2014.

⁹⁰⁸ Nathan A. Sales, "Countering Iran's Global Terrorism - United States Department of State," 2018, <https://www.state.gov/countering-irans-global-terrorism/>.

⁹⁰⁹ Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," p. 97.

⁹¹⁰ "Iran Calls Military Intervention in Bahrain 'Unacceptable,'" *Voice of America - English*, 2011, <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/iran-calls-military-intervention-bahrain-unacceptable>.

laden with weapons off its coasts in the same year.⁹¹¹ Moreover, in 2015, Bahrain discovered tons of C4 bombs and other arms with the culprits connected to Iran. This made Manama charge Tehran promotion of domestic “sabotage and terrorism.” Due to the “continuing interference [and igniting] confessional sedition,” Bahrain recalled its envoy from Tehran and ordered the Iranian counterpart to leave Manama within 72 hours.⁹¹² The foreign affairs minister al-Khalifa has to rhetorically ask, “Do you know the amount of explosive material smuggled into Bahrain? It was sufficient to obliterate Manama from existence.”⁹¹³

Bahrain arrested 116 alleged members of a terrorist cell reportedly funded and equipped by the IRGC were apprehended on 3 March 2018. Various types of weapons ranging from light to heavy arms and explosives were confiscated. Forty-eight of the terrorists apprehended reportedly trained in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq courtesy of the IRGC. The cell intended to target security personnel and energy properties in Bahrain.⁹¹⁴ Manama has challenged Tehran’s naval destabilization efforts in the Gulf in 2019. Since 2013, Bahrain has confiscated many boats originating from Iran bearing firearms.⁹¹⁵

In drawing things to a close, Bahrain fears Iran’s support for its proxies, especially in Yemen, which led to the toppling of the Yemeni government by the Houthi rebels. When the Iranian foreign minister posted on Tehran’s arms aid to the countries fighting terrorism, the Bahraini minister of foreign affairs replied to his Iranian counterpart as follows: “stop exporting the weapons that have caused wars and sedition.”⁹¹⁶

b. Qatar

Bahrain perceives threats from Qatar but of a lesser magnitude compared to Saudi Arabia or the UAE. While in the UAE, Qatar’s threat perception comes mainly from the support it gives transnational MB and other groups that have tendencies to support

⁹¹¹ Rivera, “Iran’s Involvement in Bahrain Iran’s Involvement in Bahrain: A Battleground as Part of the Islamic Regime’s Larger Existential Conflict.”

⁹¹² Al Jazeera, “Bahrain Recalls Ambassador from Iran over ‘Meddling’ ,” *Al Jazeera*, 10/02/2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/2/bahrain-recalls-ambassador-from-iran-over-meddling>.

⁹¹³ Akbarzadeh, “Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms,” p. 100.

⁹¹⁴ Soroush, “Bahraini Militant Support.”

⁹¹⁵ Jon Hoffman, “A Brewing Proto-Insurgency: Is Bahrain the Next Target of Iran’s Regional Ambitions?” *Small Wars Journal*, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jml/art/brewing-proto-insurgency-bahrain-next-target-irans-regional-ambitions>.

⁹¹⁶ Habib Toumi, “Iran Uses Daesh as Pretext to Meddle in Region’ ,” *Gulf News*, 08/10/2015, <https://gulfnews.com/world/Gulf/bahrain/iran-uses-daesh-as-pretext-to-meddle-in-region-1.1563956>; Akbarzadeh, “Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikdoms,” p. 99.

political Islam, Bahrain's threat perception, much like that of Saudi Arabia, comes mainly from Qatar's relationship with Iran. In the Gulf, Bahrain's regime is the only one with wide support of the MB, therefore not constituting a threat to the regime. Bahrain has used the MB as a counterweight against the Shiites. Moreover, Muslim brotherhood linked groups are registered as political societies allowing them to participate in the parliament.

During the uprisings that overwhelmed the al-Khalifa regime, the regime used groups such as al-Minbar to shore up support from the Sunnis against the 'Shiite demonstrators.' In Shia dominated areas of Bahrain, Al-Minbar sometimes urged the government to crack harder on dissensions. Indeed, the stance of the group has been "highly critical of the Shi'i revolt, which it describes as sectarian, violent and a reflection of terrorism."⁹¹⁷ Kylie Moore-Gilbert noted that the support of the MB groups "played a crucial role in the monarchy's ability to maintain its grip on power."⁹¹⁸

When it comes to Iran, as mentioned earlier, Qatar is one of the countries within the GCC that maintains a good relationship with Iran which. Since 2011, the Bahraini regime has experienced a threat to its survival due to protests by mainly Shiites linked to Iranian meddling. Therefore, Bahrain should be concerned about Iran's growing influence in the region, which both the regimes consider as destructive and constituting a threat to their stability and survival.

Moreover, Qatar uses Aljazeera to delegitimize the Al-Khalifah ruling family. Through the Aljazeera channel, series of programmes that Manama see as an act of delegitimizing by the tiny nation was aired.⁹¹⁹ According to Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the program is nothing but a new episode in a series of conspiracies by a rogue state against the Kingdom of Bahrain and the security and stability of the entire region. Moreover, Qatar has become the greatest danger to the GCC for the Arab Gulf States, as it seeks in all its efforts to undermine the regimes and stir up discord in the alliance, and

⁹¹⁷ Elisheva Machlis, "Al-Wefaq and the February 14 Uprising: Islam, Nationalism and Democracy - The Shi'i-Bahraini Discourse," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 52, no. 6 (2016), pp. 978-95, doi:10.1080/00263206.2016.1198327.

⁹¹⁸ Kylie Moore-Gilbert, "A Band of (Muslim) Brothers? Exploring Bahrain's Role in the Qatar Crisis | Middle East Institute," 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/band-muslim-brothers-exploring-bahrains-role-qatar-crisis>.

⁹¹⁹ "Shouting In The Dark: Al Jazeera Bahrain Documentary Shows The Bloody Fight For Democracy," *HuffPost*, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/shouting-in-the-dark-bahr_n_918944.

split the ranks among its peoples.⁹²⁰ Indeed, Bahrain views Qatar's action as shaking the security and stability of its regime while meddling in its affairs.

c. ISIS

ISIS is small and has weapons that are not as sophisticated as the ones owned by Bahrain, yet the regime perceived threat from its advances. The threat from the IS emanates from its ability to bomb locations across the Gulf. In 2014, a bomb blast in Daraz, a village inhabited by Shiites, came after police raided some Sunni areas and seized some weapons. The bomb blast was linked to cohorts of ISIS in Bahrain.

Although Sunni groups with Salafist inclination support the al-Khalifa regime against the Shiite protests during the Arab Uprisings, some of its citizens such as Turki al-Binali, Yuusuf al-Binali and Mohammed Isa al-Binali (who was an officer in the Bahrain Defence Forces) defected to join ISIS. Yusuf died while fighting with Daesh in Syria. Bahrain is worried about 12⁹²¹ of its citizens that participated and fought with the Islamic State coming back to undermine the regime. Some Bahraini Salafists already seeking the regime's overthrow is a fresh and frightening change.

Furthermore, Bahrain grant citizenship to foreigners of different nationalities to work in its security to 'protect the royal family's firm grip on power while the demonstrations orchestrated by its Shiites continues. Therefore, there is a possibility of the Islamic State penetrating Bahrain's security apparatus, therefore shifting their loyalty to ISIS. An official in Bahrain puts forward this fear: *"The threat [of ISIL] is real, the issue is very serious. These are people from within the security services, from the police and the military. We have people who want to turn Bahrain into part of the new caliphate. And they see the Al Khalifas as the enemy."*⁹²²

⁹²⁰ Khalid Alkhalifa, "Khalid Bin Ahmed on Twitter: 'من الواضح ان في قطر هناك من لا يريد خير للبحرين .. وما ' / Twitter," 08/05/2011, <https://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa/status/99281312271183872>.

⁹²¹ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Up to 11 , 000 Foreign Fighters in Syria ; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans," *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation Insight*, 2013, <https://icsr.info/2013/12/17/11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.

⁹²² Giorgio Cafiero, Daniel Wagner, "Bahrain's Daesh Dilemma," *HuffPost*, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bahrains-daesh-dilemma_b_6462998?ncid=engmodushpimg00000006.

B. BALANCING STRATEGIES

1. Internal Balancing Strategies:

a. *Regime Crackdown on Demonstrators, Buying Support Through Government Palliatives*

During the protests in Manama, far from being willing to make political concessions, the regime launched a social benefits package that grants almost \$3,000 to every household with the ultimate goal of calming the waters.⁹²³ Moreover, the regime concluded plans to spend over \$500 million for the construction of 4,000 low-cost homes under its social housing scheme.⁹²⁴ However, beyond these prerogatives, the protests were only diluted thanks to the strong repression operated by the regime forces, which also had the support of foreign forces that entered the Kingdom's territory. It refers to the forces that arrived there since mid-March sent by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as part of the Peninsula Shield Force, a military force created within the framework of the GCC.

The regime used the mainstream press to artfully spread the picture of a Shi'i rebellion organized by Tehran against Sunnis.⁹²⁵ It is noteworthy that during the initial stage of the demonstrations in Manama, chants like "neither Sunni nor Shia, we are one" was heard, making the whole protests cross-sectarian.⁹²⁶ Consequently, this proved positive given that the Sunni demonstrators stayed away from the protest grounds while the security agents, with assistance from the PSF contingents from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi advancing to rescue the regime from collapse.⁹²⁷

The government made use of its security forces, who fired tear gas and rubber bullets to clamp down on demonstrators.⁹²⁸ Failure of the Bahraini security forces to bring things under control and considering that the actions of the Shiites open the way to destabilize the country, which threatens the Al-Khalifa's authority, led Bahrain to seek

⁹²³ Barany, "The 'Arab Spring' in the Kingdoms."

⁹²⁴ Claire Ferris-Lay, "Bahrain Inks Record \$505m Social Housing Deal," *Arabianbusiness*, 2012, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/bahrain-inks-record-505m-social-housing-deal-438427.html>.

⁹²⁵ Toby Matthiesen, "Sectarianization as Securitization: Identity Politics and Counter-Revolution in Bahrain," *Sectarianization Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. by Nader Hashemi, Postel Danny, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 208, <http://library1.nida.ac.th/termpaper6/sd/2554/19755.pdf>.

⁹²⁶ Zainab Al-Khawaja, "Bahrain: Protesters Reject Sunni-Shia Split Claims," *Refworld*, 03/23/2011, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4d8c60862.html>.

⁹²⁷ Matthiesen, "Sectarianization as Securitization: Identity Politics and Counter-Revolution in Bahrain," pp. 199–214.

⁹²⁸ Barany, "The 'Arab Spring' in the Kingdoms."

help from the GCC. On March 14, Saudi troops and Emirati police officers from the GCC Peninsula Shield Force arrived in Bahrain. Iran has been against the GCC's PSF response in Bahrain while regarding it to be an unacceptable initiative from Riyadh.⁹²⁹ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has criticized the clampdown as "bad, unjustifiable and irreparable" and human rights abuses.⁹³⁰ Moreover, given that Tehran sees the PSF's actions in Bahrain as "invasion and occupation", it fiercely opposed Riyadh-led intervention in the uprisings in Bahrain.⁹³¹

As the contingent marched to Bahrain, demonstrators were crushed by the Bahraini security forces. Although demonstrators were expelled from the Pearl Roundabout, protests persisted and even extended to the rest of the state amid a continued crackdown.⁹³² The regime was swift in declaring a state of emergency, a ban on protests, as well as other punitive actions. From then on, regular small-scale protests have erupted in Shia cities, and low-level assaults persist on police and other security forces.⁹³³

Bahrain suspended the activities of al-wefaq and froze its fund in May 2016. Moreover, a court in Bahrain ordered al-wefaq to be disbanded due to its link with terrorism in June 2016. Consequently, the government stripped Sheikh Isa Qassim, the spiritual leader of al-wefaq of his nationality for "*creating a sectarian atmosphere and of forming groups that follow foreign religious ideologies and political entities.*"⁹³⁴

In response, Crown Prince Salman, who has favoured reform, attempted to launch talks with oppositions. However, his effort became futile as it was sabotaged by the security establishment and some traditionalist within the ruling regime that have uncompromising stance towards the Shiites and loyal to the king's court.⁹³⁵ The intra-regime tension, especially the constant tussle for control inside the family particularly

⁹²⁹ "Iran Calls Military Intervention in Bahrain 'Unacceptable.'"

⁹³⁰ Martin Chulov, "Bahrain Unleashes Forces on Protesters' Camp," *The Guardian*, (03/16/2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/16/bahrain-protesters-military-operation-manama>; Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. by Khalid S. Almezaini, Jean-Marc Rickli, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 96.

⁹³¹ Ethan Bronner, Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Put Down Unrest," *The New York Times*, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>; Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," p. 96.

⁹³² Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," p. 324.

⁹³³ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁹³⁴ "Bahrain Court Orders Shia Opposition Group to Be Dissolved, *The Guardian*," (11/09/2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/17/bahrain-al-wefaq-shia-opposition-group-sunni>.

⁹³⁵ Lucas, "The Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," p. 323.

among the King and the late Prime Minister, challenged the administration's responses to the demonstrations.

There are two opposing factions in the royal family: the one led by the king, Hamad Isa al-Khalifah and his uncle, Prime Minister Khalifah bin Salman al Khalifah, who have been most responsible for the repression carried out in recent years and have been undaunted to calls for political changes. In this club of traditionalists are also the foreign minister Khalid bin Ahmed and the chief of Bahrain Defence Force, Khalifah bin Ahmed al-Khalifah. On the other hand, the crown prince, Salman bin Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifah and the younger members of the dynasty, who have received training in the United States and Europe, are the most in favour of introducing reforms and progressively favouring the democratization of the small emirate. However, the king and the prime minister have influence and responsibility for the policy that has led to a clampdown on protestors. Yet, the king and the crown prince tried to utilize democratic reforms as a way to discredit family challengers and strengthen the credibility of the family without relinquishing power to the people. Furthermore, the Sunni in Bahrain, who have now united against the Shia majority, impose demands in return for their sustained endorsement of the regime.⁹³⁶

Given Bahrain's security environment which is highlighted by threats its leaders perceive from Iran, and of course its weakness as a small and not so rich country (in comparison to its Gulf neighbours in the GCC, Bahrain is the poorest in terms of natural resources), it usually meekly supports all of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy initiatives. Bahrain's position can be understood well when we look at the common threat it shares with Saudi Arabia. Bahrain's suspicion of Iran has to do with its majority Shia population against the minority Sunni ruling al-Khalifa monarchy, its nuclear ambition, and its claims for the island.⁹³⁷

Saudi Arabia has long served as Bahrain's regional protector, whose role is at most supplemented by the rest of the GCC states. Saudi Arabia has as well propped up the Bahraini economy. Oil production in Bahrain depends primarily upon Saudi Arabia's generosity. Bahrain receives half of the net profits of the Abu Safah oil field, which

⁹³⁶ *ibid*, p. 325.

⁹³⁷ Ottaway, "Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy."

accounts for around 50 to 67% of Bahrain's total income.⁹³⁸ Nevertheless, Bahrain's position on Iran oscillates around reacting strongly and extremely conciliatory, especially when claims to Bahrain territories are made by Iran. For example, Bahrain suspended negotiations over natural gas purchases from Iran when one of Khamenei's adviser declared that Bahrain is Iran's fourteenth province in 2009. At the same time, in 2009, Bahrain's government ordered the closure of a newspaper for publishing an article condemning Iran and its political system. However, while Bahrain hosts the United States Fifth Fleet, it has affirmed that it will never allow its land to be used for operations against Iran.⁹³⁹

b. Armament (Military Expenditure and Arms Transfers)

While Jane's Defence Weekly considers military spending in Bahrain as "opaque at best",⁹⁴⁰ information available from SIPRI demonstrates how military spending has increased since Bahrain's independence. **(See Table 12: Bahrain's Military Expenditure from 1971-2020. for comparison).** From the table, it can be seen that Bahrain's military expenditure kept rising. For example, compared to the first decade of the 2000s, the current decade (2010-present) Bahrain's Military expenditure rose from \$ 7.1 billion to \$ 12.4 billion, a 74.5% rise.

Bahrain's military expenditure has risen by 60.9%, from \$973 million in 2009 to \$1.6bn in 2014 as a result of the threats it perceived in its environment. Bahrain's military spending on recurring items grew steadily in 2013 and 2014 before the collapse in the price of oil.⁹⁴¹ The figure does not include spending from its other security services units as well as acquisition and construction. Nonetheless, military spending often exceeds the amount planned.⁹⁴²

As a result of the decline in oil prices, the country's defence budget for 2015 shrank by more than 4% to \$1.5 billion, with a corresponding 2.9% cut as a share of government spending on the military.⁹⁴³ Compared to its peak expenditure in 2014, then

⁹³⁸ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁹³⁹ Ottaway, "Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy."

⁹⁴⁰ Soroush, "Bahraini Militant Support."

⁹⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁹⁴² Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁹⁴³ "SIPRI-Milex-Data-1949-2018_0," n.d.

2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 defence expenditure declined by 2.5%, 2.2%, 4.5%, 3.5%, 13% respectively. The share of government spending peaked in 2014 at 15.7%.

Table 14: Bahrain's Military Spending from 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
MILEX (Bn USD)	1,232	1,372	1,514	1,615	1,550	1,574	1,580	1,543	1,558	1,405
% Change	23	11.4	10.4	6.7	-4	1.6	0.4	-2.3	1	-9.8

Data Source: SIPRI MILEX

About 85% of Bahrain's weapons and military equipment are of American origin. The United States provided Bahrain with almost all the weapons it requested. Arms transfers to Bahrain from the US is mainly via the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Bahrain is the largest beneficiary of assistance from the US. The US had supported Bahrain with nearly all kinds of weapons it could afford. Bahrain received from the US Excess Defence Articles exceeding \$55 million in 2011.⁹⁴⁴ Bahrain regarded its purchases of arms from the United States as a form of protection. In a leaked classified document suggested the King of Bahrain emphasized the crucial role played by US forces in maintaining Bahrain's stability in the region. The emir of Bahrain noted that, "*We feel we are protected by your presence ... Without you, we would be squashed.*" The emir also commended the weapons that the US offered to Bahrain through the FMF. Stressing that some states, in terms of price and quality, might be able to contest the United States arms, he considers the US support unparalleled.⁹⁴⁵

However, due to the government crackdown on protesters during the Arab Uprising in 2011 in Manama, the Obama administration suspended the \$53 million deal to sell some kinds of arms to Bahrain, citing violation of human rights on the part of the government.⁹⁴⁶ Given that Bahrain needs weapons to deal with the protesters and as well protect its regime from collapsing, in response to restrictions on small arms (that could be used in crowd control) sales, it turned to Turkey for the purchase of 170⁹⁴⁷ Cobra armoured personnel carriers instead of Humvees from the US.⁹⁴⁸ Apart from the

⁹⁴⁴ Cordesman, *The Gulf Military Balance Vol. 1*.

⁹⁴⁵ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

⁹⁴⁶ Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," p. 31.

⁹⁴⁷ "SIPRI Trade Registers."

⁹⁴⁸ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

Humvees, all other military equipment continued to be supplied unhindered by the Americans.

The US has also transferred 25 units of AIM-120C Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) between 2010 and 2015 at an estimated cost of \$ 74 million.⁹⁴⁹ In a \$70 million deal signed in 2011, Bahrain ordered 30 MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATacMS) surface-to-surface missile (SSM) from the US. The SSMs were delivered in 2013. Bahrain has also ordered 12 towed guns and some 24 GMLRS guided rockets from the US. Orders were made in 2012 and 2015, while deliveries were made in 2017, respectively.

In 2016, Bahrain applied to the United States to purchase 17 or 19 F-16Vs to replace its obsolete F-5 Phantom aircraft. This deal is valued at about \$4 billion. The Obama administration has slandered it with abuse of 'human rights.' However, Trump reversed US policy towards Bahrain when his administration approved a weapons deal that the Obama administration had denied because of what it saw as repressive policies during the uprising in the country.⁹⁵⁰

On September 8, 2017, the Trump administration informed Congress of the possible sale of 221 TOW missiles of various types and a couple of 35-Meter Fast Patrol Boats estimated to cost \$27 million and \$60 million, respectively. In addition, in 2018, the US has agreed to transfer 12 AH-1Z Viper combat helicopters and associated munitions to Bahrain. The estimated value of the sale is \$911 million, and delivery planned for 2022.⁹⁵¹ In the same year, Bahrain entered a \$1.12 billion contract with Lockheed Martin to supply 16 F-16V Block 70 Fighting Falcons, which is planned to be delivered in 2022-2023.⁹⁵² Moreover, at an estimated cost of \$750 million, Bahrain was also authorized to procure different weapons to support the acquired F-16 in 2019. The

⁹⁴⁹ "Bahrain to Receive 25 AIM-120C-7 AMRAAM Missiles," (11/10/2019), https://www.defenseworld.net/news/3354/Bahrain_to_receive_25_AIM_120C_7_AMRAAM_missiles#.Xce3ETMzbIU.

⁹⁵⁰ Samuel Osborne, "Donald Trump 'to Approve Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain' Blocked by Barack Obama," (2017), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-bahrain-blocked-barack-obama-yemen-civil-war-middle-east-a7568911.html>; Thomas, "Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy."

⁹⁵¹ "Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 2008 to 2018," *Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute*, 2019, http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php.

⁹⁵² "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," p. 379.

weapons consist of 32 AIM-9X missiles, 20 AGM-84 Block II Harpoon missiles, and 100 GBU-39, 250-pound small-diameter bombs among others.⁹⁵³

The US has authorized the possible sale of the PAC-3 air defence system to Bahrain. In the contract, the PAC-3 system is to be supplemented by thirty-six Patriot MIM-104E Enhanced Missiles Guidance, nine M903 missiles, two AN/MPQ-65 radars and related equipment at an estimated \$2.5 billion in 2019. According to Ralph Acaba, the Patriot system “*will ensure the Kingdom of Bahrain is well-equipped to defend against ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and manned and unmanned aircraft.*”⁹⁵⁴

According to SIPRI data, Turkey’s arms transfer to Bahrain constitutes 14.4% of its total arms imported from 2010 to 2018. In a \$63 million deal, 60 units of ARMA armour personnel carriers were ordered in 2010 and delivered in 2012.⁹⁵⁵ Turkey also delivered 13 units of ARMA APC to Bahrain in 2010 at \$11 million.⁹⁵⁶ In addition, between 2009 and 2014, 20 Black Scorpion APC / APV and 17 MM-40 Exocet Anti-ship missile were transferred from France to Bahrain.

With the Russian Federation, Bahrain signed a bilateral intergovernmental agreement on military-technical cooperation in May 2015. The Kingdom of Bahrain became the first customer of the Kornet-EM guided anti-tank missile systems (export version of the Kornet-D anti-tank missile system). Two hundred and fifty units of the missiles were transferred to the kingdom in 2016.⁹⁵⁷ Bahrain is said to be the first country to import this type of weapons from Russia in the Gulf.

⁹⁵³ Transmittal No: 18-20, “Bahrain – Weapons to Support F-16 Block 70/F-16V Aircraft Fleet,” *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, 2019, <https://dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/bahrain-weapons-support-f-16-block-70f-16v-aircraft-fleet>.

⁹⁵⁴ Jen Judson, “Bahrain Solidifies Patriot Buy - Defense News,” 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2019/08/13/bahrain-solidifies-patriot-buy/>.

⁹⁵⁵ “Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa,” *Military Balance*, vol. 113, no. 1 (2013), p. 411, doi:10.1080/04597222.2013.757003.

⁹⁵⁶ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1970-2018.”

⁹⁵⁷ “Russia to Supply Kornet-E Anti-Tank Guided Missile to Bahrain” *Global Defense*, 2017,” (01/11/2020), https://www.armyrecognition.com/september_2017_global_defense_security_news_industry/russia_to_supply_kornet-e-anti-tank-guided-missile-to-bahrain.html.

Bahrain started negotiating the acquisition of the S-400 air defence system with Russia in 2017.⁹⁵⁸ If acquired, the S400 will enhance Bahrain's air defence capability to bar possible missiles that may be launched from Iran or its proxies from landing on its tiny territory. Nevertheless, the acquisition would threaten the US protective buffer and put US fighter jets operating there in imminent danger. It is noteworthy that Bahrain and its regional patron, Saudi Arabia, acknowledged the importance of US bases around them likewise the US.

In 2019 October, at the Bahrain International Defence Exhibition and Conference Bahrain displayed its domestically manufactured arms. According to its interior minister, "We are now seeing an increase in Bahrain's defence production with the backing of the BDF and this lays the foundation for military industries."⁹⁵⁹ But what could have motivated this move? Bahrain, like other Gulf countries, heavily relies on arms from its protectors. While Bahrain was able to purchase most of the arms it requested from the US, and elsewhere, it has nevertheless faced some restrictions on some kind of weapons that could be used for crowd control from the US since the start of the Arab Uprisings. Of course, this could have been the reason why it turned to Turkey for the purchase of Cobra armoured personnel carriers and other types of weapons to meet its needs for internal security. Even though Bahrain won for itself the status of a major non-NATO ally, it remained sceptical over the support of its main security guarantor.

2. External Balancing Strategies

a. Bahrain's Balancing in the Regional Environment

Since the Arab Uprisings, Bahrain's balancing act has been fully bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to balance its main threats perception. Thanks to the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) which gave Saudi, UAE and Kuwait the platform for propping up the Bahraini defensive against what is considered meddling in the internal affairs of Bahrain and the other GCC states. Riyadh provided Bahrain with financial and military aid to the tune of at least \$500 million to help the economy of Bahrain.

⁹⁵⁸ Amreen Khan, "Bahrain In Talks For Purchase Of Russian S-400 Missile Systems," (11/06/2019), https://www.defenseworld.net/news/20994/Bahrain_In_Talks_For_Purchase_Of_Russian_S_400_Missile_Systems#.XcKKR-gzbiW.

⁹⁵⁹ "Bahrain to Boost Defence Industry," ZAWYA-Defence, 2019, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/business/story/Bahrain_to_boost_defence_industry-SNG_158082176/.

When Bahrain teetered in the strains of the Arab Spring, and its security became almost overwhelmed to suppress the protesters, it turned to the GCC for help. To strengthen the Bahraini regime's ability to restore order and security and protect government facilities, it invoked the collective security agreement of the GCC. On 14 March 2011, the GCC's PSF entered Bahrain, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE forces participated in securing strategic locations while allowing the protesters to be crushed by the Bahraini police. The reason for the intervention of this joint bloc force can be fully understood, considering the countries, Saudi Arabia in particular, fear of a possible domino effect resulting in the destabilization of the Gulf as a whole. This explains why Saudi Arabia has been the State that has made the greatest commitment to the crisis in Bahrain. As it happens, for Saudi Arabia to provide support to Bahrain implies protecting the Gulf monarchies as a whole and sending a message to its Shiite population and containing Iranian influence in the area.

Despite the lack of clear evidence, the regime listed fears regarding Tehran's armed interference as its main motivation to call on the PSF. Yet, the notoriety of blunt language by Tehran persisted after the PSF intervened in Bahrain.⁹⁶⁰ Tehran might today, as in the past, be a credible challenge for the sovereignty of Bahrain, but overestimating the threat may be a handy strategy to cultivate Manama's profile internationally. Given its majority Shia population that many are believed to have links to Iran, portraying Bahrain as a target of foreign interference can be accurately assumed. Yet, internal threats, in the case of Bahrain, the majority downtrodden Shia population with their demands for political openness and sometimes the demands of abolishing the monarchy, seems to be more threatening to regimes legitimacy than an external threat emanating from Iran.

After the intervention, in May 2012, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain proposed a closer political and military alliance between the GCC states. However, the remaining four States members of the Cooperation Council showed no interest. In December 2016, the

⁹⁶⁰ Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry." pp. 383-384

Gulf countries held an annual Gulf Summit in Bahrain, reaffirming the Gulf countries' commitment to strengthen defence integration.⁹⁶¹

In favour of Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, Bahrain also backed the effort to confront the Houthi rebels. In 2016, after the assault on the embassy buildings of Saudi Arabia in Iran, Bahrain supported Riyadh in the disagreement that ensued where it followed Riyadh to sever ties with Tehran.⁹⁶² Both countries took part in various joint naval drills to improve preparedness for war and standard functional collaboration in 2017.

Moreover, Manama has backed the Riyadh-led Qatari embargo accusing Doha of weakening the GCC due to its friendly ties with Tehran. Bahrain also took part in 2018, along with Riyadh and other countries, in the joint military exercises, the Arab Shield I.⁹⁶³ In Jordan, Bahrain with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other like-minded countries also participated in Arab security discussions to deal with regional crises.⁹⁶⁴ With the blessings of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain also aligned with Israel and later recognised it in a bid to deal with Iran.⁹⁶⁵ While Bahrain embarked on a strategy of balancing Iran through bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia, it allowed Iranian enterprises to work on its territories to prevent Iranian aggressions while pursuing an explicitly pro-Saudi foreign policy. Moreover, Manama would not openly or disproportionately condemn Tehran. It should be remembered that Bahrain also announces that it is not permitting its territories to attack Tehran's nuclear plants. With the threat from Iran and being on the side of Saudi Arabia, Manama had to abandon the nearly \$4 billion preliminary agreement for the exploration of gas with Iran.⁹⁶⁶

⁹⁶¹ Ahmed al-Masri, "GCC Meet Wraps up in Bahrain with 'Sakhir Declaration,'" *Anadolu Agency*, 12/02/2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/gcc-meet-wraps-up-in-bahrain-with-sakhir-declaration-/701498#>.

⁹⁶² "Bahrain Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Iran," *Al Jazeera*, 01/04/2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/4/bahrain-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-iran>.

⁹⁶³ Giorgio Cafiero, Cinzia Bianco, "'Arab Shield 1': The Birth of an Arab NATO?," *Middle East Institute*, 11/13/2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/arab-shield-1-birth-arab-nato>.

⁹⁶⁴ Kuttub, "Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait and Jordan Hold Arab Security Talks."

⁹⁶⁵ Matthew Lee, "Bahrain Becomes Latest Arab Nation to Recognize," *AP News*, 09/12/2020, <https://apnews.com/article/bahrain-israel-united-arab-emirates-middle-east-politics-e21e371f1b406b209f93df5973d1fa46>.

⁹⁶⁶ Tamsin Carlisle, "Iran-Bahrain Gas Project off Again," *The National*, 05/23/2011, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/iran-bahrain-gas-project-off-again-1.365404>.

b. Bahrain's Commitment to its Extra-regional Allies

Bahrain continued to maintain its security relations with the US as a way of balancing the threats it continues to perceive in its regional environment. Bahrain is a small country that is subject to manipulation by Iran and even its key regional security guarantor, Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the presence of the US in its soil via the bases access and related security agreements serve to preserve and protect the regime from excessive meddling to some extent. Given that Bahrain hosts the Naval Support Activity Bahrain (NAS Bahrain), where the US 5th fleet and the Central Command are located, the tiny country is crucial for the US in the region. The Kingdom is considered a pivot state for the American security strategy in the region since the Juffair naval base became, in 1995. Furthermore, in 2002 the United States designated Bahrain as a Major Non-NATO ally.

During the protests in Bahrain, the US position has been extremely difficult, given that pressing for reforms in Bahrain could jeopardize its presence in Manama. At the same time, supporting the regime by ignoring the plight of the demonstrators and the regimes violent response favours an improved relationship with its allies in the Gulf while securing its access to the Juffair base. However, this position is not consistent with the US pro-democracy stance.

Bahrain and the US extended the defence cooperation agreement for an unspecified period during the monarch's visit to Washington in November 2017, though prior agreements have been extended for ten-year periods. Bahrain signed an agreement with the United Kingdom to establish by London a permanent naval base on the Kingdom's territory in the vicinity of the port of Mina Salman in December 2014. Officially, the launch of the HMS Juffair was announced in April 2018.⁹⁶⁷ It was entrusted with material and technical support to the Royal Navy ships, operating in the waters of the Gulf and the Indian ocean in general. It was officially announced that 500 British soldiers would serve on an ongoing basis.

⁹⁶⁷ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 119, no. 1 (2019), p. 334, doi:10.1080/04597222.2018.1561033.

CHAPTER SIX

COMPARING AND EXPLAINING THE PARADOX OF DIVERGING BALANCING STRATEGIES OF SAUDI ARABIA, THE UAE AND BAHRAIN

I. SIMILARITIES IN BALANCING STRATEGIES OF THE STATES

A. PRE-ARAB UPRISINGS PERIOD

The states balancing behaviours included both internal and external efforts such as armament, regional alignment in the form of the GCC, and an extra-regional alignment in military cooperation with the West, the USA in particular.

1. Similar Internal Balancing Strategies

States undertake armament measures such as increasing local arms production, and in the case of lack of an industrial base to produce weapons, purchasing arms from abroad is opted. An urgent need to balance the threat perceived, especially when there is an impending danger, is the primary driver. Consequently, this policy leads to an increase in the defence outlays of states. This can be seen as a balancing strategy as states tend to increase their strength vis a vis threat, real or perceived. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain lacked the human resources to build their weapons. Therefore, they opted for arms transfers as a strategy to balance the threats they perceived. In other words, they dealt with their weakness through arms transfers which reflected in high budgetary spending for military hardware.

The war between Iran and Iraq has led to US military aid and weapons transfers to Saudi Arabia. The threat perceived from the revolution in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War pushed Saudi Arabia to step up its military expenditure. During the decade of the Iran-Iraq War, arms transferred to Saudi Arabia increased from \$4.525 billion in the 1970s to \$16.144 billion in the 1980s. The increase accounts for 207.6 per cent. Similarly, in the UAE, an increase in arms expenditure was noticed. According to data from SIPRI, its arms spending rose from \$2.985 billion to \$12.51 billion, representing a 138.6% increase compared to the decade preceding the war. Also, Manama increased its military size and added new weaponry to its stockpile. As a result, compared to the decade before the war,

there was an increase from \$1,409.52 billion to \$3,151 billion (i.e., a rise of 123.6%) in the 1980s. According to the SIPRI MILEX data, in 1980, Bahrain's defence budget increased from \$299 million to \$316 million (5.7 per cent). Of note is that Bahrain's armament is far lower than that of the UAE or Saudi Arabia. One of the reasons could be attributed to the lack of adequate funds to spend on armament. As stated earlier, Bahrain relies on Saudi Arabia for cash accruing from crude. Yet, Bahrain's spending on arms has increased since its independence, which can be attributed to its perceived threats.

As a share of the GDP of the countries, their defence outlays kept on increasing as they become more threatened by the actions of their antagonistic neighbours. From the first regional turmoil (Iran-Iraq War), there is an increase in the percentage of GDP the states allocated for military expenditure. For example, Saudi Arabia spent an average of 16.5% GDP during the Iran-Iraq War, while Bahrain spent an average of 5.7% during the decade of the war. Still, between 1991 and 2000, with the decline of a direct threat from Iran, and Iraq being contained following its invasion of Kuwait, their defence outlays decreased.

Saudi Arabia spent 11.2%, while the UAE and Bahrain spent 7.7% and 4.5% of their GDP on armament, respectively. Between 2001 and 2010, the percentage of the GDP expended on defence declined further because of the absence of threats that might emanate from Iraq and also the presence of the US forces in Iraq served as a buffer against Iran. Bahrain spent an average of 3.6% of its GDP on military expenditure. Saudi Arabia and the UAE spent 8.8% and 4.5% of their GDP on military expenditure, respectively (see table 15 below).

Table 15: Average Military Expenditure of the States by the percentage of GDP 1981-2010

Years	1981-90	1991-2000	2001-10
Saudi Arabia	15.9	11.2	8.8
The UAE	-	7.7	4.5
Bahrain	5.7	5.3	3.6

Data Source: SIPRI MILEX All figures expressed in percentage

2. Regional Alignments

a. *Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, the GCC and the Iran-Iraq War*

Having spent billions on armament and being surrounded by two militarily stronger states (Iraq and Iran) with hostile and hegemonic ambitions meant that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain needed to work together to deter antagonistic acts of their neighbours. As such, the countries opted for regional alignment by establishing the GCC. Efforts to establish regional security cooperation dates to the mid-1970s to respond to revolutionary elements in the Gulf. Oman, ravaged by internal rebellion, sought to push for such with the support of Saudi Arabia; however, it failed. Finally, the shocks from the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War led to the creation of the GCC in 1981.⁹⁶⁸ Though it was created to boost the interaction among its members in every area, the primary inspiration behind its development was the perception of insecurity by the Arab Gulf monarchs.

The GCC aims to promote economic, political and military cooperation among its six members, thereby preserving the status quo and protecting its member states and society from the spill over effect of the Iran-Iraq War.⁹⁶⁹ As Joseph Kechichian noted, the GCC announced that it would spend 30.6 billion dollars on joint training, military hardware, and command regulation soon after forming the alliance. When it started, the GCC countries have been very open about security concerns, as defence ministers have formulated unique policies.⁹⁷⁰ Since the organization was founded during the Iran-Iraq conflict, the GCC is primarily a security organization aiming to bring countries with the same ideals under its security umbrella. For this reason, the bloc's first concern was how its members could be immunized from the effects of the war, how they could contain Iran without aggravating the conflict and how to support Iraq in a way that it did not have enough power to interfere in the affairs of the block.

Therefore, the GCC may better be represented as an arrangement to enhance domestic security cooperation and ultimately all-out defence cooperation to combat Iran's threat perception. As cited in David Priess, R. K. Ramazani suggested that "*At best, die*

⁹⁶⁸ Ferhat Pirinççi, *Orta Doğu'daki Silahlanma Girişimlerinin Küresel ve Bölgesel Güvenliğe Etkisi: Soğuk Savaş Dönemi*, Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2010.

⁹⁶⁹ Gause, "Revolution and Threat Perception: Iran and the Middle East," pp. 637–45.

⁹⁷⁰ Joseph A. Kechichian, "Trends in Saudi National Security," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2 (1999), pp. 232–53.

[Iran-Iraq] war was a catalyst, not a cause, of the GCC'S creation More than any other single factor, the Iranian Revolution helped to coalesce the security concerns of Saudi Arabia and the other monarchies in the Gulf region."⁹⁷¹ Saudi Arabia reached a security agreement with the states that constituted the GCC on a bilateral basis. Saudi Arabia concluded bilateral defence cooperation agreements with Bahrain in 1981 and the UAE, Qatar, and Oman in 1982.⁹⁷²

In order to protect against the export of the Islamic revolution to other countries in the region, Saudi Arabia took several measures against Iran, one of which was cooperation with Iraq.⁹⁷³ Through the GCC, Saudi Arabia made extensive use of its capabilities during the Iran-Iraq war to transfer intelligence information, arms supply, and finances to Baghdad, making the conflict the longest and with the highest death toll in Middle Eastern history.

The UAE opted for regional security guarantees from Saudi Arabia and the GCC. Despite its declared official neutrality, the UAE (emirates of Abu Dhabi in particular) aided Saddam Hussein in billions of dollars during the Iran-Iraq War. At the same time, during the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, the UAE sided with Iran to balance the threat from Iraq. Bahrain also relied on the security umbrella of Saudi Arabia and the GCC heavily for its security and stability. Bahrain's balancing strategy aligns with Saudi Arabia on almost every issue, whether it is in its interest or not, if that will guarantee its survival. Its balancing strategies go hand in hand with that of its regional guarantor at a time balancing Iran with Iraq and vice versa. During the Iran-Iraq War, Bahrain aligned with Saudi Arabia to support Iraq. Moreover, Bahrain also views more cooperation with the rest of the states in the Arab Gulf as a form of security for its stability and survival. It has been argued that Manama played a crucial role in closer cooperation and integration of the

⁹⁷¹ Priess, "Balance-of-threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Interpretative Case Study," p. 152.

⁹⁷² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Realignment of Regional Politics and the Future of the Gulf Cooperation Council," *The New Regional Order in the Middle East: Changes and Challenges*, ed. by Sara Bazoobandi, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, pp. 49–68, doi:10.1142/9789814324885_0003.

⁹⁷³ Piriinçi, *Orta Doğu'daki Silahlanma Girişimlerinin Küresel ve Bölgesel Güvenliğe Etkisi: Soğuk Savaş Dönemi*, Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2010.

GCC. The balancing strategy of the states is in line with Walt's argument that states conclude an alliance with the least dangerous side.⁹⁷⁴

b. Alliance Against Iraq Following the Invasion of Kuwait

With great concern, the states perceived Iraq's aggression on Kuwait as threatening since Saudi Arabia, a key state in the regional alliance could have been the next in line after Kuwait. Among other things, Iran could well take advantage of the situation and gain in the new geopolitical situation. Therefore, in Riyadh, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was regarded as a betrayal of a friend and ally. On August 2, 1990, a meeting of the Arab League was held, which adopted resolution 3036, recognized the invasion of Iraqi troops in fraternal Kuwait by aggression with the presence of victims and destruction demand the immediate withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwaiti territory.⁹⁷⁵

The Arab League decided to create a coalition of Arab and Muslim countries for Kuwait's liberation and transfer coalition troops to the territory of Saudi Arabia to protect the borders of state and regional security from external invasion. The de jure government of Kuwait, led by Emir Jaber al-Sabah, was also temporarily transferred to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia significantly strengthened its position and authority among the Arab countries. When this attempt, coupled with the international community's effort to resolve the aggression failed, Saudi Arabia has not hesitated on seeking the help of extra-regional allies, the US in particular.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia took an active part in creating a broad international coalition. And it was Saudi Arabia that in 1991 became the important regional partner of Washington, giving the US and coalition forces military bases. In addition, the Saudi government allowed the temporary deployment of thousands of American and allied military forces under "Operation Desert Shield" to its territory. The operation's main mission is to protect Saudi Arabian territory and stop Iraq from advancing further to Saudi Arabia.⁹⁷⁶ Finally, on January 17, 1991, by the UN Security Council's decision, a

⁹⁷⁴ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 264.

⁹⁷⁵ Elihu Lauterpacht, C. J. Greenwood, Marc Weller, *The Kuwait Crisis: Basic Documents*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 293.

⁹⁷⁶ Joseph Kostiner, "Part Two : The Iraq-Kuwait Conflict," *Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region*, ed. by Joseph Kostiner, Vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, p. 117.

multinational force of anti-Iraq coalition launched military operations under the code name “Operation Desert Storm”.⁹⁷⁷

The political objectives of the desert storm operation were to liberate Kuwait and return power to the legitimate government, restoring stability in the Gulf region, and changing the composition of the Iraqi leadership and its political course. The military objectives of the operation were to destroy Iraq’s military potential, which threatens not just the Gulf states but also Israel and the rest of the countries of the Middle East, and to deprive Iraq of the ability to produce nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.⁹⁷⁸

Operation Desert Storm utilised multinational forces as part of an “air-land-naval campaign” that included an air-offensive operation, an air-ground offensive operation and a naval landing operation. The alliance received more than 800,000 troops, of which over 500,000 are American soldiers with the consent of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.⁹⁷⁹ The Saudi government provided coalition forces with bases, food, and fuel to conduct air campaigns against Iraq.⁹⁸⁰ In the battle for the liberation of Ras al-Khafji, Saudi military forces played an active role in the military operations against Saddam. It is said that Saudi Airforce conducted over 7000 sorties.⁹⁸¹ The incremental cost of the war amounted to \$61 billion, of which Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states provided \$36 billion.⁹⁸²

During the war, the US received \$6,572 billion in UAE aid and allowed the US to use its airbases and ports, which is the only one deep enough to harbour US aircraft carrier in the Gulf.⁹⁸³ The Bahrain army was among the GCC’s 3,000 Peninsula Shield Force assigned supporting tasks at the time of Kuwait liberation. Bahrain was the main naval coalition headquarters as well as the commencement for allied air campaigns against Iraq.

⁹⁷⁷ “Gulf War Fast Facts,” *CNN Library*, (03/24/2019),

<https://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/15/world/meast/Gulf-war-fast-facts/index.html>.

⁹⁷⁸ “Operation Desert Storm: Evaluation of the Air Campaign,” (04/05/2019),

http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/gao/nsiad97134/app_05.htm.

⁹⁷⁹ “Saudi Arabia - The Gulf War and Its Aftermath,” *Britannica Encyclopedia*, (03/24/2019),

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Persian-Gulf-War-and-its-aftermath>.

⁹⁸⁰ Sharon Otterman, “SAUDI ARABIA: Withdrawal of U.S. Forces,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/saudi-arabia-withdrawl-us-forces>.

⁹⁸¹ “Saudi Arabia - The Gulf War and Its Aftermath.”

⁹⁸² “Gulf War Fast Facts.”

⁹⁸³ Sean Foley, “The UAE: Political Issues and Security Dilemmas,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1999), pp. 25–45, <https://www.badrinvestments.com/wp-content/uploads/1999/03/DA-UAE-Political-issues-and-security-dilemmas-March-1999.pdf>.

Bahrain air force joined the coalition forces to conduct operations in Iraq.⁹⁸⁴ As seen, it is threat perception that played a key role in the alignment strategies of the states where they align with the least dangerous side.⁹⁸⁵

c. The Arab Gulf States and Iran During the Gulf War

The Arab Gulf monarchs and Iran found themselves on almost the same page during the Gulf War that Iraq invaded Kuwait. The threat perception of Iran receded due to the change in its policies since the death of Khomeini. Iran does not talk of exporting its revolution to the other side of the Gulf anymore. The rise of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as the President of Iran made it moderate its policies towards the rest of the Arab Gulf states. Besides Iran's weak status after its eight-year war with Iraq, Saudi Arabia had no interest in further weakening Iran.⁹⁸⁶

The Gulf War brought about a similar geopolitical goal of weakening Iraq, the main threat to Saudi Arabia and Iran. Accordingly, Tehran unequivocally condemned the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. At the same time, the Iranian leadership was categorically against the deployment of an additional contingent of US military forces in the region since they could be further used as a means of pressure on Iran. Nevertheless, it supported the imposition of international sanctions against Iraq when voting in the UN.

In 1991, Iran suggested creating a comprehensive security system in the Gulf zone based on an alliance between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab Gulf countries. The GCC's passivity is what allowed for Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, according to Iran.⁹⁸⁷ However, the Arab Gulf states did not consider Iranian demand for creating a regional security organization under UN resolution 598 because the states are afraid of Iran's dominant role should a regional security organization be created. In addition, Iran has an advantage in population, geography and natural resources compared to the GCC member states. What was seen in the aftermath of Kuwait's liberation was a defence agreement with the US, UK and France and massive naval and air presence around Iran, which is against its regional stance on security.

⁹⁸⁴ *Bahrain Diplomatic Handbook Volume 1 Strategic Information and Developments*, Washington: International Business Publication, 2018, p. 181.

⁹⁸⁵ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. p. 264.

⁹⁸⁶ Henner Fürtig, "Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf: The Interregional Order and US Policy," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2007), p. 630.

⁹⁸⁷ Lotfian, "A Regional Security System in the Gulf," pp. 109–34.

3. Extra-regional Security-related Alliances

All the three countries maintain security-related relations with the West, the US in particular, to serve as their security guarantor. Saudi Arabia had security agreements with the US since the second world war. Saudi Arabia served as one of the pillars of the US strategy of containment of the Soviet Union. While the United States and Saudi Arabia have had different military relations in various forms since the 1940s, operational ties were established in the Iran-Iraq War, which is the basis for the United States' closeness and Saudi Arabia. During the Iran-Iraq War, the threat perceived from Iran forced Saudi Arabia to demand an extended deployment of a US warning and surveillance aircraft in Dharan to help the Saudi Arabian Air Force secure its oil facilities.

Bahrain swapped Britain with the US as its security guarantor since its independence in 1971. Concerns about regional security made Manama sign the Juffair agreement in 1971, where the US established a temporary naval base.⁹⁸⁸ The UAE, on the other hand, had opposed a security-related alliance with the West in the region. However, it abandoned its erstwhile idea of opposition because of the growing threat it perceived from its neighbours and the failure of Saudi Arabia, the biggest of the Arab Gulf states, to balance the Arab Gulf states' threat perception effectively.

Saudi Arabia's limits were exposed by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which led Bahrain and later the UAE to sign a DCA with the US.⁹⁸⁹ Under the agreements, the US gained access to several military bases that guarantee to balance their external threat perceptions. The states see extra-regional security arrangements as indispensable because it has enabled them to focus on long-term military modernization strategies, ideally to build a defensive capability worthy of blocking an attack from outside until the arrival of reinforcement from their allies.

⁹⁸⁸ Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing*, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

⁹⁸⁹ Richard F. Grimmett, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1990-1997," 1998, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/transfers90-97.pdf>, pp. 8-9.

B. SIMILAR BALANCING STRATEGIES SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS

1. Similar Internal Balancing Strategies of the States

While dealing with the threats the Arab Uprisings brought to the regimes, similar strategies were utilised irrespective of the magnitude of the threat perception. The ruling regimes of the three countries relied on state institutions such as the police to repress harshly and crackdown with a strong military presence on the streets and monitor social networks to avoid planning more protests. In Saudi Arabia, the formation of an anti-corruption commission and some measures to improve the functioning of the judicial sector were announced. Women were also allowed to vote and run for municipal elections from 2015. Moreover, measures designed to avoid future protests such as salary increases for civil servants, loans, health benefits, education and improvements in assisting the unemployed were put in place.

Although the UAE was not a scene of major protests during the Arab Spring, the regime was swift to implement a series of measures to hinder any possible popular unrest. The regime took harsh repressive measures to ward off any sign of discontent. The Emirati government introduced restrictions on using the internet to hinder the use of virtual platforms to organize protests. Moreover, the regime reinforced its material legitimacy by increasing distributive expenses from hydrocarbon income. The government also created new jobs, and efforts were made to improve living conditions in the country's least developed areas by investing over \$1 billion in infrastructural projects.⁹⁹⁰

In Bahrain, where the protests were a lot, the regime launched a social benefits package granted to every household with the ultimate goal of calming the waters of the uprisings. Moreover, the regime concluded plans to construct new homes under its social housing scheme. Like in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the regime used its security forces to clamp down on demonstrators. A state of emergency was declared, and a ban on

⁹⁹⁰ Marina Ottaway, Marwan Muasher, "Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, yet Unmet.," *Middle East*, no. December (2011), p. 19, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/12/16/arab-monarchies-chance-for-reform-yet-unmet/8e7t>.

protests and other punitive measures was taken by the regime to curb discontent. At the same time, Bahrain stripped its citizens of their nationality.

Like in the period before the Arab Uprisings, the states also increased their military spending. Table 16 below shows the rise in average military spending of the states since the Arab Uprisings compared to the decade that heralds the turmoil.

Table 16: Average MILEX of the states 2011-2020

Countries	Average MILEX (Billion USD)	
	2001-2010	2011-2020
Saudi Arabia	29.4	68.4
The UAE	8.9	14.3
Bahrain	598.5 m	1.5

Data Source: SIPRI MILEX.

2. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the GCC Counter-revolution in Bahrain

Since the Arab Uprisings established a mobilization directed against the political authority in the Middle East, the Arab Gulf countries are marked by a battle to maintain the status quo. In other words, the possible modification of domestic regimes became a security issue for the monarchies in the Gulf region. As the theme of democracy arises in the face of the demands seen around regime change, with greater political openness and sectarian inclusion of downtrodden groups, the GCC acted to conserve its government systems mostly ruled by Sunni elites.

The GCC's main objective of confronting Iran in the face of the Arab Spring sees the opportunity for greater action. The GCC seeks to maintain Sunni monarchs in the Gulf by containing a political change in the form of greater political and democratic openness. In 2011, when Bahrain faced difficulties in containing the Arab Uprisings, Al-Khalifa requested the assistance of the GCC. The collective action of the GCC started on the 14th of May 2011, when troops from the GCC's Peninsula Shield made up mainly of soldiers from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were sent to help Bahrain's security forces.⁹⁹¹

⁹⁹¹ Ethan Bronner, Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Put Down Unrest," *The New York Times*, (03/14/2011), https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html?_r=1&hp.

The objective was to contain the protests organized by the Shiite majority and protect the al-Khalifah's Sunni government. This occurred as a result of the intensification of protests and the instability promoted by Shiite groups that demanded higher levels of representation and political participation. The pressure that these groups exerted on the Sunni government raised the concern of the other members of the GCC. Its downfall would likely mean the emergence of a Shiite government, which the GCC countries want to avoid at all costs. Therefore, there was a military intervention in Bahrain to end the uprising. The intervention in Bahrain was sui generis when using military apparatus to contain unrest in another country by the GCC.

3. Strategic Economic Aids to Allies

Saudi Arabia and the UAE participated in giving economic aid to their allies both within the Gulf and beyond. For the execution of such a posture, Saudi Arabia and the UAE resorted to the use of the GCC, thus obtaining the assistance of other Gulf monarchies to contain the revolts in Bahrain and Oman, the two most fragile monarchies in the Gulf.⁹⁹²

Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Bahrain lacks oil reserves present in the other GCC states. Therefore, Saudi Arabia supported the al-Khalifa regime by allowing it to sell crude oil from Saudi oil fields.⁹⁹³ Also, during the GCC's ministerial summit held in March 2011, in the capital of Saudi Arabia, a \$20 billion "Marshal Plan" was approved for Bahrain and Oman.⁹⁹⁴ This reflected the strategy of the states of granting massive sums of money to avoid any kind of instability in allied regimes. According to Rieger:

"The Al-Khalifa regime and the Sultanate have far less financial means to buy regime stability through large-scale spending programs than do the other GCC states. Saudi Arabia, which will likely contribute the lion's share of the intra-GCC financial

⁹⁹² Abdullah Baabood, "Gulf Countries and Arab Transitions: Role, Support and Effects," vol. 2014, no. July (2014), pp. 42–47.

⁹⁹³ Downs, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain," p. 213.

⁹⁹⁴ Ulf Laessing, Cynthia Johnson, "Gulf States Launch \$20 Billion Fund for Oman and Bahrain," *Reuters*, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-Gulf-fund-idUSTRE7294B120110310>; Salman Shaikh, "Gulf States: The Challenge of Reform," *The Arab Spring Implications for British Policy*, Conservative Middle East Council, 2011, p. 31.

aid program, is more than ready to invest large sums to guarantee the regime stability of its fellow GCC states."⁹⁹⁵

Shortly thereafter, on May 14 of the same year, the council countries, under Saudi leadership, intervene directly in Bahrain after the monarch Al-Khalifa turns to the agency with a request for assistance, consolidating the Saudi efforts to contain the demonstrations in the country.⁹⁹⁶

Beyond the Gulf, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi started pursuing stronger relations with other monarchies to hinder the spread of the Arab Uprisings. While the US does not want to see Morocco pulled back into an authoritarian dictatorship⁹⁹⁷ like that of Saudi Arabia, the US was left in a no-win situation as it is unable to support its allies. Riyadh took the initiative and provided the aid they needed.⁹⁹⁸ Therefore, during the uprisings in Morocco, it supported the regime and considered that Morocco and Jordan join the GCC in the hope that Morocco becomes its sphere of influence and prevent the rise of Islamist groups that will disrupt the status quo in the Middle East. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's aiding of Morocco should be seen as an attempt to maintain stability. The strong support for monarchies suggests that Saudi Arabia and the GCC are poised to defend the government system in the states. Yet, due to reforms carried out by Morocco, the involvement of Islamists did not pose a challenge to the Moroccan regime. The country's monarchical character made it look as if it was an exception to the authoritarian system in the Gulf.⁹⁹⁹

In Egypt, given that Hosni Mubarak's departure is against Saudi Arabia's interest in stability and regime survival, it was fast in establishing good diplomatic relations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that took over immediately to fill the vacuum left. During the SCAF's regime that Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi headed, Saudi Arabia committed to aiding the new regime with 4 billion dollars, of which

⁹⁹⁵ Rene Reiger, "In Search of Stability: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," Cambridge, 2013, p. 7. <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20120>.

⁹⁹⁶ Bronner, Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Put Down Unrest," (03/14/2011).

⁹⁹⁷ Morocco had successfully navigated the troubled environment of the unrest by introducing a new constitution and scheduling early elections.

⁹⁹⁸ Shadi Hamid, "A New Security Strategy, but Not Necessarily a New GCC," *The National*, 05/16/2011, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/a-new-security-strategy-but-not-necessarily-a-new-gcc-1.391806>.

⁹⁹⁹ David Pollock, "A Moroccan Exception?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2013; Curtis Ryan, "The Moroccan-Saudi Rift: The Shattering of a Privileged Political Alliance," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 04/03/2019, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2019/04/190403105317297.html>.

\$2 billion was provided.¹⁰⁰⁰ Given that MB is viewed as ideological opposition to the Saudi regime, the assistance given to Egypt's government can be read as an effort by Saudi Arabia to minimize MB's popularity and stifle access to a leadership role in Egypt.

Of the \$12 billion aid announced by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE to the new regime in Egypt right after the coup, Riyadh provided \$5 billion.¹⁰⁰¹ Providing aid to the military government in Egypt served Saudi Arabia's interest in maintaining its regime survival because the MB has been perceived as having an internal security dimension to its regime survival.

Like in Saudi Arabia, the unanticipated demise of Hosni Mubarak, which was the outcome of the Arab Uprisings, shocked those at the helm of authority in the UAE. Although Mubarak's demise presented a threat to Gulf regimes, since Mubarak is a long-time friend and they are pro-West focused in their foreign policy, the UAE is concerned mainly with the growth of MB and political Islamists. Therefore, Abu Dhabi backed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to maintain hold of the change from Mubarak to a new regime. In the Spring of 2011, the UAE promised \$3.3 billion in funding for Egypt, but the sum ultimately spent remains uncertain¹⁰⁰² due to the coming to prominence of MB to power via parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012. Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Bahrain could not participate in this venture given its weaker economic status.

4. Meddling in the Domestic Affairs of States Facing Uprisings

Meddling in countries' domestic affairs facing uprisings is one of the strategies used by Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a countermeasure against the revolutionaries that constituted a threat to their internal and regional security. Both governments directly participated in the internal process of states facing popular uprisings to undermine them from progressing towards democracy. The countries are bent on securing their regional supremacy and crushing any positive democratic transformation. They often aim to weaken the likely rise of the Islamist current in the region. Moreover, they fear the rise of the Qatar-Ankara axis that has supported the uprisings. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have

¹⁰⁰⁰ Mohsin Khan, Richard LeBaron, "What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?," *Atlantic Council*, 2013, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-will-the-Gulfs-12-billion-buy-in-egypt/>.

¹⁰⁰¹ Khan, LeBaron, "What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?"

¹⁰⁰² Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*, p. 200.

become crucial players in undermining popular demonstrations of the Arab Uprisings by gradually influencing the countries' political and economic policies.¹⁰⁰³

When the Egyptians started their protests on January 25, 2011, the Saudi elite interpreted this phenomenon as a possible cause of two threats to Saudi security. Internally, the transnational MB, which is strongly present in Egypt, could become an internal challenge to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi regime. Externally there was the fear that their main Arab ally would move to the sphere of Iran's influence. The victories of parties linked to the MB in Tunisia (November 2011) and Egypt (June 2012) contributed to the fear of the regime in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This was because Islamists linked to or influenced by the MB constitute an important opposition organization in the kingdom since the early 1990s.¹⁰⁰⁴

Saudi Arabia and the UAE started organizing a military takeover with the Egyptian military after the MB gained power in Egypt. In addition to making contact with Abd al-Fattah Al-Sisi and providing money for the coup conspirators, they also bankrolled resistance movement against Mursi and the MB through a partnership with youths that engendered the convenient excuse for the military takeover.¹⁰⁰⁵ The military, headed by Al-Sisi, overthrew the MB-led government of Mursi and took power on July 3, 2013. Islamists' demonstrations were brutalized; over a thousand demonstrators were murdered while tens of thousands, together with Mursi and all MB representatives, have been detained.

In September 2013, the group was outlawed and, in December of the same year, labelled a terrorist organization in Cairo.¹⁰⁰⁶ Together with ISIS and Al-Qaida, the MB and various associated organizations were also declared terrorists in Abu Dhabi.

¹⁰⁰³ Adam Hanieh, "Ambitions of a Global Gulf: The Arab Uprisings, Yemen and the Saudi-Emirati Alliance," *MERIP*, 2018, <https://merip.org/2019/03/ambitions-of-a-global-Gulf/>.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring."

¹⁰⁰⁵ Louisa Loveluck, "Egypt's Military Rise to Power 'Partly Bankrolled by Emirates', Audio Recording Suggests," *The Telegraph*, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/11445060/Egypt-military-rise-to-power-partly-bankrolled-by-Emirates-audio-recording-suggests.html>.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Mohannad Sabry, "Egypt Declares Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Group," *Al-Monitor*, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/egypt-brotherhood-terrorist-organization-cabinet.html>.

Additional organizations, including the Houthis, Shiite militias in Iraq and radical Shiite groups in the Gulf, have also been identified as terrorists in the UAE.¹⁰⁰⁷

Manama could not actively participate in this endeavour because Bahrain was not so concerned about the MB because internally, the MB constituted a support base for the regime. Unlike the UAE or Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's regime is the only one with wide support of the MB, therefore, not constituting a threat to the regime. Bahrain has used the MB as a counterweight against the Shiites. Moreover, Muslim brotherhood linked groups are registered as political societies allowing them to participate in the parliament.

During the uprisings that overwhelmed the al-Khalifa regime, the regime used groups such as al-Minbar to shore up support from the Sunnis against the 'Shiite demonstrators.' In Shia dominated areas of Bahrain, Al-Minbar sometimes urged the government to crack ever harder on dissensions. Indeed, the group's stance has been "highly critical of the Shi'i revolt, which it describes as sectarian, violent and a reflection of terrorism."¹⁰⁰⁸ Kylie Moore-Gilbert noted that the support of the MB groups "has played a crucial role in the monarchy's ability to maintain its grip on power."¹⁰⁰⁹

From the onset of the Yemen crisis, the states, especially Abu Dhabi, were looking for ways to strengthen ties with the Omar al-Bashir government, which had provided mercenaries to the Saudi anti-Houthi alliance.¹⁰¹⁰ However, owing to its disgust at al-Bashir's link with the MB and friendly ties with Ankara and Doha, Abu Dhabi soon lost trust in Bashir's leadership and thus smoothened the path to a coup d'état against him during the Sudanese uprisings. Abu Dhabi in particular, did so by discontinuing the deliveries of fuel to Khartoum in December 2018 to disrupt the economic stability of the regime Omar al-Bashir was heading.¹⁰¹¹ Like in Cairo, they worked to see that after the

¹⁰⁰⁷ "List of Groups Designated Terrorist Organisations by the UAE."

¹⁰⁰⁸ Machlis, "Al-Wefaq and the February 14 Uprising: Islam, Nationalism and Democracy - The Shi'i-Bahraini Discourse," pp. 978-95.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Moore-Gilbert, "A Band of (Muslim) Brothers? Exploring Bahrain's Role in the Qatar Crisis | Middle East Institute."

¹⁰¹⁰ Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy." p. 16.

¹⁰¹¹ Khalid Abdelaziz, Michael Georgy, Maha El Dahan, "Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir Was Destined to Fall," *Reuters*, 07/03/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-bashir-fall/>.

collapse of al-Bashir, the military remains germane in politics and that members of the opposition movement are not permitted to seize control.¹⁰¹²

Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi used the developments to further their interests, injecting \$3 billion to attract the Transitional Military Council (TMC) leaders.¹⁰¹³ Meddling by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi led demonstrators in Khartoum to chant, “We do not want Saudi aid even if we have to eat beans and falafel!”¹⁰¹⁴ Remarkably, Sudan’s position has shifted to a pro-Saudi stance even after former President Omar al-Bashir’s fall and the dramatic change in the Sudanese government.¹⁰¹⁵

5. Intra-GCC alignment: The Diplomatic Isolation of Qatar

Qatar is another theatre that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain policies of isolating the country converged. Within the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain imposed a total land, air and sea blockade on Qatar to punish Doha’s alleged support for terrorism. Qatar’s land and sea borders have been closed, air links suspended, Qatari citizens expelled, diplomatic ties with Doha suspended. The office of the Aljazeera television channel in Riyadh was closed.¹⁰¹⁶

While they acted similarly, their objectives seem to be different given the nature of threats they perceived from Qatar’s actions. This came when the regimes perceive two threats with links to domestic and international environments from different angles. Saudi Arabia sought to stop Doha policies which it sees as ‘disruptive’ against countering its main external threats, i.e., Iran.

While for Abu Dhabi, the threat perception of Political Islam is prioritized, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain perceive Iran’s threat as primary. Indeed, Qatar’s independent policies clashed with Saudi Arabia’s view on what regional security should be. Apart

¹⁰¹² Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner.”

¹⁰¹³ Nafisa Eltahir, “Sudan Has Received Half the \$3 Billion Promised by Saudi Arabia and UAE,” *Reuters*, 09/08/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-emirates-saudi-idUSKBN1WN137>; Khalid Abdelaziz, “Saudi Arabia, UAE to Send \$3 Billion in Aid to Sudan,” *Reuters*, 04/21/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests-idUSKCN1RX0DG>.

¹⁰¹⁴ Murat Sofuoglu, “Why Are Sudan’s Protesters Snubbing the UAE and Saudi Arabia?” *TRT World*, 04/26/2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-are-sudan-s-protesters-snubbing-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia-26179>.

¹⁰¹⁵ Gerald M Feierstein, “The Impact of Middle East Regional Competition on Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa,” *Middle East Institute*, 2020.

¹⁰¹⁶ Al Jazeera, “GCC Crisis at Deadlock One Year On,” *Al Jazeera*, 06/05/2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/6/5/gcc-crisis-at-deadlock-one-year-on>.

from that, Doha's declining to adhere to Saudi Arabia's regional leadership suggested that Doha has a quest for a regional role that is not in conformity with Riyadh's ambition. Until the 1990s, Qatar orientated itself towards Riyadh in terms of foreign policy. However, since the time Sheikh Hamad Ibn Khalifa Al Thani took office in 1995, who during his reign (until 2013) with the exploration and export of its huge natural gas reserves to become the largest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in the world,¹⁰¹⁷ Doha opted for independence in its foreign policy which has been irking the Saudis. Saudi Arabia perceives Doha as challenging its hegemonic role in the region.

As stated earlier, the disputes between Riyadh and Doha are well-founded. The thorniest issue for the Saudi regime is Doha's relations with Iran. Given Qatar's policy of supporting revolutionaries against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Uprisings, Saudi Arabia and its allies withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in 2014 while citing "meddling in their internal affairs" as the reason.¹⁰¹⁸ In 2014, Saudi Arabia and the UAE even briefly withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in a clear warning to Qatar's "dissident". As Saudi Arabia felt threatened by the rise of the MB and the support it received from Doha, its threat perception intensified. Saudi regime's protest should be expected because it considers Qatar a small state that must work on its terms.

After the coup in Egypt, nuclear agreement, change of leadership in Riyadh, and Tehran's growing influence, the regime's perception of MB's threat has been downgraded. In contrast, the Iranian threat has become the most prominent for leaders in Riyadh. Given that Doha enjoys good relations with Tehran, Riyadh sees it as an obstacle to its effort to isolate Iran. A diplomatic crisis culminated into a Riyadh-led blockade on Doha in 2017 for having good relations with Tehran. Of the 13 demands made by the quartet a few days from the embargo's enforcement, the first is about demanding Doha limit its ties with Tehran.

In Doha, Abu Dhabi aims to counter political Islam and Tehran's threat, given its rising influence in the region. While what has been considered most disagreeable in Riyadh and Manama's case is Doha's good dealings with Tehran, Abu Dhabi is

¹⁰¹⁷ "Qatar Leads Global LNG Exports but Who Else Make the Top 5?," *NS Energy*, 2019, <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/features/qatar-global-lng-exports-top-5/>.

¹⁰¹⁸ Ian Black, "Arab States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar in Protest at 'interference'," *The Guardian*, 03/05/2014.

particularly dismayed by Qatar's sympathy towards Islamists and political Islam. Although Qatar's regional policy has triggered significant discontent among its GCC neighbours after the Arab Uprisings, it has been its policies towards Egypt that have persuaded the UAE to move against it. Qatar has lent a hand to President Muhammad Mursi's administration with billions in financial aid.¹⁰¹⁹

Abu Dhabi had no second thought of getting rid of the MB in Egypt because it is seen as a chance to balance its primary threat perception, political Islamists al-Islah, which the Egyptian MB may inspire with possible support from Doha. As a result of the coup against the MB in Egypt, the good relationship that existed between Qatar and Egypt witnessed a severe setback. This was partly attributed to several MB members that moved to Qatar to escape persecution by the new military junta in Cairo.¹⁰²⁰

Also, the fall of Mursi was a watershed moment in the dispute between Abu Dhabi and Doha, where the UAE attempted in 2013 to diminish Doha's ascendancy within and outside the Middle east. Since then, Abu Dhabi worked with Riyadh to pressure Doha. Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Manama recalled their envoys from Qatar in March 2014 and proscribed the Cairo based MB and other groups affiliated with it as terrorists. This action worked as it forced Doha to eventually concede and sent many MB members out of its territory. Consequently, the dispute thawed, and in November 2014, the envoys were reinstated.¹⁰²¹

When Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani became Qatar's emir, there was an expectation of aligned foreign and security policies with the Riyadh axis. However, it soon became apparent that Doha did not want to alter its foreign and security policies to match the UAE or even Saudi Arabia. The initial test was evidenced in its activities against Abu Dhabi's sponsoring militias that were pivotal in the taking of Tripoli in 2014. Moreover, the coming to power of Donald Trump as the US president in 2017 and the change of

¹⁰¹⁹ Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*.

¹⁰²⁰ Hossam Bahgat, Mostafa Mohie, "Exclusive Wikileaks Cables Trace Ebb and Flow of Egypt-UAE Relations Exclusive Wikileaks Cables Trace Ebb and Flow of Egypt-UAE Relations," *Middle East Policy Platform*, 2015, <https://www.me-policy.org/2015/07/26/exclusive-wikileaks-cables-trace-ebb-and-flow-of-egypt-uae-relations-2/>; Abigail Hauslohner, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Finds Havens Abroad," *The Washington Post*, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-finds-havens-abroad/2013/11/05/438f2dfe-463a-11e3-95a9-3f15b5618ba8_story.html.

¹⁰²¹ Matthias Sailer, "Changed Priorities in the Gulf: Saudi Arabia and the Emirates Rethink Their Relationship with Egypt," *SWP Comments*, vol. 8 (2016), pp. 1–8; Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

leadership in Saudi Arabia that happened in 2015 strengthened Abu Dhabi's circumstances to make a fresh move to push Doha to accede.

Donald Trump is believed to have given Abu Dhabi and Riyadh the green light to take Qatar's stricter stance.¹⁰²² Indeed, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's successful lobbying in the US saw Donald Trump making his first visit abroad to Saudi Arabia following his inauguration.¹⁰²³ On a two-day trip in May 2017, Donald Trump visited Saudi Arabia, where he met various Gulf leaders of which the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi was part just before the ensuing dispute. Trump saw the Saudi led axis as a partner to his anti-Iranian plan outlined in his electioneering.¹⁰²⁴

The Arab Quartet (Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Manama and Cairo) and Yemen severed diplomatic ties and blocked ground, air and sea boundaries of Doha in June 2017.¹⁰²⁵ Subsequently, the quartet approached Doha with a list of 13 demands Qatar should abide by if the blockade must be removed. Among the requests are that its warm relations with Iran be reduced, stopping the MB funding and other groups regarded as terrorists, revoking its Al-Jazeera Channels' license, closure of the Turkish military base, among other items.¹⁰²⁶ If Doha had gone with the Quartet's demand, it would have implied the end of its independent foreign policy. Qatar declined to yield to neighbour's pressure; instead, it reinforced its ties to Ankara and Tehran and preserved its regional policies as much as possible.¹⁰²⁷

¹⁰²² Anne Barnard, David D. Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind - The New York Times," (10/24/2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia-egypt-bahrain-united-arab-emirates.html>.

¹⁰²³ David D. Kirkpatrick et al., "The Wooing of Jared Kushner: How the Saudis Got a Friend in the White House," *The New York Times*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/world/middleeast/saudi-mbs-jared-kushner.html>.

¹⁰²⁴ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

¹⁰²⁵ Barnard, Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind - The New York Times."

¹⁰²⁶ "Arab States Issue 13 Demands to End Qatar-Gulf Crisis," *Al Jazeera*, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/12/arab-states-issue-13-demands-to-end-qatar-gulf-crisis>.

¹⁰²⁷ Ben Hubbard, "That Punishing Blockade? 'We've Moved On,' Qatar Says," *The New York Times*, (10/24/2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/middleeast/qatar-blockade-goods.html>; Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

6. Alignment with The Enemy of An Enemy: Saudi Arabia, The UAE and Bahrain's Link with Israel

Another way to deal with Iran, especially in the Levant, is through alignment with Israel, Iran's enemy. A nuclear Iran, perceived by the states and Israel as a security vulnerability, has brought both sides to strengthen clandestine partnerships in areas of security significance.¹⁰²⁸ Moreover, the Arab Gulf Monarchs and Israel were troubled by Washington's gesture to warm ties with Tehran.¹⁰²⁹

During the nuclear negotiation with Iran, they both worked by pressuring the stakeholders (i.e., the five permanent members of the security council of the UN plus Germany) to ensure the deal did not materialize. As Prince Talal noted, Riyadh is exerting "maximum pressure now on the United States not to succumb to the president of Iran's soft talk."¹⁰³⁰ Failing in that objective, they denounced the deal because it could make Iran an atomic power threshold country. Moreover, Tehran will overcome its western sanctions, thereby giving it the ability to extend its influence in the region even beyond. As such, believing that the deal jeopardized their mutual interests in the region reinforced intelligence sharing. They strengthened clandestine cooperation even in the security field as they coordinated military drills to target Iran's nuclear sites.¹⁰³¹ According to Fred Burton, Mossad officers have long been making a fortune from selling the Saudis intelligence information and equipment.¹⁰³²

7. Alignment Against ISIS

Initially, the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia in particular, thought of using ISIS to balance their threat of Iran. However, when the terrorist organisation proved difficult to penetrate and continue posing a threat to the security and stability of the Arab Gulf regimes, they realized ISIS could not work to their interest as a proxy to fight Iranian expansion in the region.¹⁰³³ Moreover, there was concern about Saudi Arabia and Bahraini citizens that joined ISIS returning to their territory. Consequently, the states joined the

¹⁰²⁸ Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" p. 139.

¹⁰²⁹ *ibid.* p. 140.

¹⁰³⁰ Simon Henderson, "No One in the Middle East Will Sleep," *The Atlantic*, 11/25/2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/11/no-one-in-the-middle-east-will-sleep/281845/>.

¹⁰³¹ Samuel Ramani, "Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties with The Gulf Monarchies," *HuffPost*, 12/09/2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-israel-is-strengthening_b_11946660.

¹⁰³² Jacob Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2019), pp. 433–49, doi:10.1080/00263206.2018.1509853.

¹⁰³³ Eleonora Ardemagni, "The Gulf Monarchies' Complex Ght against Daesh," 2021.

international coalition to fight ISIS while breaking up with their erstwhile strategy of shattering the crescent of Shia alliances.

This strategy of joining the anti-terror coalition can be regarded as a strategy of balancing through bandwagoning. Indeed, the states and especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are at the forefront of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. The states coordinated their efforts to delegitimize ISIS through judicial processes. As a contribution to the war against ISIS, they focused on “counter-ideology and deradicalization programmes.”¹⁰³⁴ Saudi Arabia went far to introduce incentives for whistle-blowers and those that denounce fundraising and money laundering to jihadists.¹⁰³⁵

Both Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain participated in the air war against ISIS, especially in Syria. While the UAE’s participation focused on more sophisticated targets, possibly due to its air force capability as the best in the region, Saudi Arabia focused on static and less sophisticated targets such as buildings believed to be hosting ISIS, training camps, among others things.¹⁰³⁶ It is important to note that apart from the US, the UAE is the next in terms of military support against ISIS. Indeed, the UAE has long called for adopting a common agenda on zero tolerance for terrorism, joint action to confront foreign interference in Arab affairs, enhancing cooperation among sovereign Arab states, fostering political solutions to conflicts in the region, and improving economic and political conditions through good governance and development.¹⁰³⁷ For this reason, it participated in a regional issue such as the Bahrain uprising, Yemen war; it has also engaged in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic states.¹⁰³⁸

While the Bahraini participation in the airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria¹⁰³⁹ is far limited compared to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as acknowledged by the US state

¹⁰³⁴ Frederic Wehrey, “Gulf Participation in the Anti-Islamic State Coalition: Limitations and Costs,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 09/23/2014, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/56710?lang=en>.

¹⁰³⁵ Ardemagni, “The Gulf Monarchies’ Complex Ght against Daesh.”

¹⁰³⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰³⁷ “UAE Calls for Zero Tolerance Policy Towards Terrorism to Restore Stability in the Middle East,” *Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations*, 2018, <https://www.un.int/uae/news/uae-calls-zero-tolerance-policy-towards-terrorism-restore-stability-middle-east>.

¹⁰³⁸ Rugh, “The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates,” pp. 57–70.

¹⁰³⁹ Sami Aboudi, “Bahrain Sends Warplanes to Jordan to Fight Islamic State ,” *Reuters*, 02/15/2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-bahrain/bahrain-sends-warplanes-to-jordan-to-fight-islamic-state-idUSKBN0LJ12T20150215>.

department report on terrorism,¹⁰⁴⁰ Manama indicated the kind of role it would play earlier on. Manama stated that it allows its territory to be used as a naval base and communications for the operation against ISIS.¹⁰⁴¹ Moreover, as the financial centre of the Gulf region, Manama has hosted the task force for countering money laundering and terrorist financing.¹⁰⁴²

8. Alignment with Extra-regional Powers

Both Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain maintained their alliance with the US and European countries; however, their commitments differ. In their assertive foreign policies, which is evidenced in their wars in Yemen, Libya, Syria, etc., the countries needed extra-regional powers for logistic and diplomatic support, which is entrenched in symmetry of interest between the Gulf monarchs and the West. Before that, the GCC states entered into joint naval force cooperation with the United States in December 2014.¹⁰⁴³ Under US leadership, allied naval forces conducted naval exercises near Bahrain. Particularly zealous are the Arab allies and the Americans engaged in activities to combat sea mines, fearing the mining of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran in case of an attack on it.

All the countries supported US pressure on Iran to change its behaviours and welcome a robust US military presence in the Gulf. The states did not welcome Iran's nuclear agreement with the UN security council's permanent members and Germany. For Manama, the JCPOA "does not address all sources of tension [and] the deal will lift sanctions on certain Iranian companies and figures who are linked to terrorism."¹⁰⁴⁴ Accordingly, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE viewed the agreement as a postponement to Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, not necessarily blocking it. Thus, the agreement has not freed the Gulf of the possibility of atomic weapons and did not allay the threat perceived from the programme.¹⁰⁴⁵ Bahrain also claimed that the JCPOA only increased Shiite militancy in its territory. Together with its GCC counterparts, Bahrain

¹⁰⁴⁰ Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," p. 31.

¹⁰⁴¹ "Bahrain to Play Key Role in Fight against ISIS," *Trade Arabia*, 09/15/2014, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/MISC_265674.html.

¹⁰⁴² Katzman, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," p. 31.

¹⁰⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴⁴ Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," p. 100.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Amal Sakr, "Future Center - Gulf States' Motives in Supporting US Withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal," (11/06/2019).

agreed that Iran “has become too powerful and cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.”¹⁰⁴⁶

A new US regional strategy is being implemented to distance itself from its post-2000s policy of playing a key military role in regional conflicts, thereby placing the brunt of the war on regional powers. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have received international support during their operation in Bahrain and the war in Yemen. The US and some European countries such as Britain and France even sold advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁴⁷ Moreover, while taking on a secondary role, after years of buying advanced weapons and ammunition, the Saudis and GCC countries can now wage relatively complex battles.

Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama have strengthened their military alliance with the USA due to the rising influence of Iran in the Gulf and beyond. Following the nuclear deal with Iran, the three countries took part in the US-GCC Summit at Camp David in May 2015, reaffirming Washington’s assurance to the Gulf’s defence and pushing for a deeper alliance with them.¹⁰⁴⁸ Moreover, the US has since increased its presence in the Gulf by sending more troops bases at Al Dhafra and Jebel Ali.¹⁰⁴⁹ It also deployed THAAD and Patriot air defence batteries, some 200 soldiers to Saudi Arabia following missile attacks on Saudi oil installations to bolster the kingdom’s defence capability.¹⁰⁵⁰ Amid the rising tension with Iran that ensued due to the assassination of Qassim Soleimani by the US drone strike in Iraq, the US deployed over 4,000 troops to the region.¹⁰⁵¹ All the three countries strongly supported US President Donald Trump’s policy toward Iran. They saw the need to build an international consensus against the dangers posed by Iran’s expansionist behaviour to the international community.

Abu Dhabi and Manama renewed their Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA)

¹⁰⁴⁶ Marina Ottaway, “Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy,” 2009.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Glum, “Saudi Arabia’s Youth Unemployment Problem Among King Salman’s Many New Challenges After Abdullah’s Death.”

¹⁰⁴⁸ Robert Mason, “Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2018), pp. 95–112, doi:10.1080/11926422.2018.1427123.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Kenneth Katzman, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy,” (01/21/2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

¹⁰⁵⁰ VOA, “US Deploys Air Defense Systems, Troops to Saudi Arabia,” *Voice of America*, 09/2019.

¹⁰⁵¹ Richard Sisk, “Thousands More US Troops Deploying to Middle East in Response to Iranian Threats,” *Military.Com*, 01/2020.

with the United States in 2019 and 2017, respectively. For the UAE, the deal, which has the span of 15 years, will improve military coordination between Washington and Abu Dhabi, furthering the development of an already strong military, political and economic partnership and also presents the US military with the opportunity to better respond to several scenarios in and around the UAE. The security agreement will also boost the training of UAE military personnel by the US.¹⁰⁵²

For Bahrain, the DCA that was extended is for an unspecified period though prior agreements have been extended for ten-year periods. Moreover, Bahrain signed an agreement with the United Kingdom to establish a permanent naval base on the Kingdom's territory in the vicinity of Mina Salman's port in December 2014. Officially, the launch of the HMS Juffair was announced in April 2018.¹⁰⁵³ It was entrusted with material and technical support to the Royal Navy ships, operating in the Gulf's waters and the Indian ocean in general. It was officially announced that 500 British soldiers would serve on an ongoing basis.

While the UAE and Bahrain formally renewed their DCA with the US, Saudi Arabia had no formal agreement with the US. Saudi Arabia's alliance with the US is kept out of the public and press due to its peculiar dynamics, which varies from that of the UAE, Bahrain and the rest of the Gulf states. To exemplify this, instead of airbase status to be given to Dhahran, "airfield" was a cautious way to shield the public from assuming the presence of the US is an invasion of the holy land.

American troops in Saudi Arabia have caused a stern problem for the regime emanating from the internal and external environment. While US troops stationed in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war all withdrew in 2003 due to sentiment in the public and the rise of anti-Americanism, which hinders the regime's legitimacy, Saudi Arabia decided to allow some troops stationed in its territory in 2019. Indeed, it was the pressure emanating from both within and outside the kingdom, which negatively affected the regime's legitimacy that led to American troops' withdrawal at different times since the signing of the Dhahran airfield agreement in 1945.

¹⁰⁵² "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy," 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

¹⁰⁵³ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 119, no. 1 (2019), p. 334, doi:10.1080/04597222.2018.1561033

As the custodians of the two holy sites of Islam, placing American troops on Saudi soil should affect the regime's legitimacy. For example, conservative groups in Saudi Arabia were able to mobilize the public against the regime due to US forces in the holy land. The mobilization has, in different times, caused the regime to feel its survival is at stake. Geoffrey Gresh succinctly argued that

*"... when the respective host monarchy feels that its regime's survival is threatened due to a possible coup or the imminent threat of revolution, the monarchy will call for the termination of a U.S. military basing agreement as a means to relieve pressure and as an attempt to re-exert its power and legitimacy locally."*¹⁰⁵⁴

II. EXPLAINING THE PARADOX OF DIFFERENT RESPONSES OF THE STATES

1. Explaining Different Balancing Strategies Employed by Saudi Arabia, The UAE and Bahrain When Directly Balancing Iran

The three countries have worked together to balance the Iranian threat perception via regional and extra-regional alignment. Sometimes, they go out of the way of the alliance in balancing their threat perceptions of Iran. The priorities of Saudi Arabia have been to preserve its regime, maintain stability in regions, and balance Tehran's growing influence in the Gulf and beyond. Riyadh's main zone of influence is its immediate surroundings and the countries that form it. Internal security is reflected in the desire to preserve the Gulf monarchies' status quo in the face of the Arab Spring, which affects the stability of the regime.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia seeks to contain the increase in regional power of its biggest rival, Iran, which links to its domestic environment. This desire stems from the fear that Tehran is seeking to destabilize Gulf monarchies via support for Shiites. The Saudi regime is concerned that, in the end, Tehran will become a promoter of

¹⁰⁵⁴ Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing*, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

revolutionary Shia political Islam in the Gulf countries, taking advantage of the local Shiite populations' discontent.¹⁰⁵⁵

Against this backdrop, to balance its threat perceptions, Saudi Arabia responded in various ways that are directly and indirectly related to the sources of its threats. Apart from severing ties with Iran, it worked with dissident Iranians, the MEK that have been tagged as a terrorist organisation by the Iranian regime. It also supported Kurdish forces against the regime. In the Levant, Riyadh worked against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, a pivot to Iran's growing influence. Saudi Arabia also meddled in Lebanon and intervened in Yemen against the Hezbollah and Houthi rebels to reduce the influence of its rival, Iran. Saudi Arabia also worked with the US to pressure Iran, especially during the Trump era, by supporting the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.

As one of the primary sources that the UAE elites perceive as a threat, Abu Dhabi worked with Saudi Arabia to balance Iran while conceding sometimes. It traded caution in how it acts toward Iran for reasons connected to the nature of threats they perceive which has no direct link to its internal politics as Bahrain or even Saudi Arabia. The UAEs political system, as discussed above, and Dubai's commercial link to Iranian businesses play a role in the way the UAE responds to threats it perceived. The commercial link makes Dubai and Tehran so interdependent that Iran is one of its major trading partners in the region. This makes it difficult for the emirates to hold a unified view of the threat it perceives from Iran. For example, Abu Dhabi viewed the nuclear deal signed by Iran and the P5+1 in 2015 as an avenue for Iran to lay hands in its assets abroad to bolster its subversion in the region.

In contrast, Dubai's perspective was quite nuanced, as the nuclear agreement provided it with the leverage of balancing Iran and, at the same time shielding its commercial interest from being in danger.¹⁰⁵⁶ Yet, Abu Dhabi's view always triumphed due to its vast oil wealth and Dubai's submission to Abu Dhabi's domineering and hawkish stance since the economic bailout of Dubai by Abu Dhabi in 2008. As such, the UAE worked with Riyadh to contain Iran in the region while defecting at some points.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Soubrier, "Regional Disorder and New Geo-Economic Order: Saudi Security Strategies in a Reshaped Middle East."

¹⁰⁵⁶ Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," pp. 89–106.

During the incident that led to the Saudi embassy's storming in Tehran in 2016, the UAE did not cut diplomatic ties with Iran as Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain did. The Emirati leadership tried not to provoke Iran. While the diplomatic relations between Iran and the UAE have been downgraded since the Saudi embassy attack, the UAE maintains some backchannel relations with Iran. For example, Abu Dhabi sent two official representatives to Iran in July 2019 for talks on maritime defence issues, important for Abu Dhabi and Tehran. In the background of Tehran's alleged behaviours against Abu Dhabi and its interests, the UAE's modest diplomatic response was significant.¹⁰⁵⁷ After the strikes on Abqaiq and Khurais petroleum plants, Abu Dhabi joined Washington's naval mission. The maritime mission was meant to ensure the protection of commercial ships against assaults by Tehran.¹⁰⁵⁸

The UAE's closely aligned policies with Saudi Arabia have some adverse effects on Dubai's commercial interest as Tehran moves closer to Doha and Muscat. Moreover, the UAE worked with the US to restrict Tehran's laundering of money and foreign currency exchange via Dubai and levied sanctions against the companies.¹⁰⁵⁹ The action of limiting finances to Iran by the UAE is to cripple finances to the Islamic republic to curb its destabilizing role in the Gulf and beyond.

The UAE was among the four nations¹⁰⁶⁰ in the world that publicly backed Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the P5+1 Nuclear Agreement, which Abu Dhabi considers was not ideal and conducted in such a way as to render the representatives of the GCC susceptible to the regional aspirations of Iran.¹⁰⁶¹ Indeed, the UAE ambassador to Washington noted that "Iran needs to stop its proliferation of ballistic missiles, end its support of violent proxies, cease plotting terrorist bombings and discontinue its incitement of sectarian and ethnic division" and support US's withdrawal from the JCPOA."¹⁰⁶²

¹⁰⁵⁷ Azodi, Cafiero, "The United Arab Emirates' Flexible Approach towards Iran."

¹⁰⁵⁸ Scott Neuman, "UAE Agrees To Join U.S.-Led Maritime Coalition To Protect Gulf Shipping," *NPR*, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/19/762225417/uae-agrees-to-join-u-s-led-maritime-coalition-to-protect-gulf-shipping>.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Vakil, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism," pp. 1–19.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Apart from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Israel also supported the withdrawal

¹⁰⁶¹ Sina Azodi, Giorgio Cafiero, "The United Arab Emirates' Flexible Approach towards Iran," *IRAM Center*, 10/09/2020, https://iramcenter.org/en/the-united-arab-emirates-flexible-approach-towards-iran/?send_cookie_permissions=OK.

¹⁰⁶² Hamdi, Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States," pp. 127–52.

The US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran was claimed to be the result of the UAE's excessive lobbying in Washington, which shows how the emirate influences the US. Since 2011, the UAE has made great exertions to halt the re-export of sophisticated technology to Iran, with corporations in the UAE levied by sanctions from Washington for their role in exporting weapons technology to Iran.¹⁰⁶³ Indeed geographical nearness has contributed to establishing many offices in Dubai by several Iranian companies dealing in arms. The UAE authorities have shut down tens of UAE and foreign companies engaged in sales to Iran technologies that could be of dual usage in 2012. Moreover, supplies to Tehran that contained products that may be used for their nuclear program have been confiscated.¹⁰⁶⁴

When it comes to complying with “maximum pressure” on Iran, all the three countries complied while the UAE showed more commitment than in previous years. Sanctions on Iran should harm the UAE, Dubai in particular, given that Dubai is a gateway of Iran to the international market. Dubai has been playing the role of re-exporting products to Iran. Moreover, it has a vast presence of Iranian businesspeople. According to Marc Valeri, the trade volume between Dubai and Iran has fallen by over 80% in the years between 2009 and 2014.¹⁰⁶⁵ Moreover, the UAE could not comply with the sanctions because many companies owned by Iranians in the UAE have Emirati sponsors to establish business outside the country's free trade areas. According to the UAE laws, 50% of emirate citizen ownership is required to open a business.

Given that Iranian companies' sponsors from the UAE side come from reputable families in the UAE, it became hard for the emirate to isolate businesses belonging to Iranians. As such, the UAE is unwilling to take drastic measures on Iranian businesses as that will affect Iran and Emiratis.¹⁰⁶⁶ The UAE has been less friendly to the Iranian business community since 2011, with several challenges in purchasing property or obtaining loans. This is true for the big Iranian migrants that the UAE authorities viewed with greater scepticism. However, controls and the expanded surveillance the state

¹⁰⁶³ Ayman El-Dessouki, Ola Rafik Mansour, “Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab Emirates' Policy towards Iran,” *Review of Economics and Political Science*, vol. ahead-of-p, no. ahead-of-print (2020), doi:10.1108/refs-09-2019-0124.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Katzman, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy.”

¹⁰⁶⁵ Marc Valeri, “The Gulf Monarchies and Iran: Between Confrontation and Geostrategic Realities,” 2015, p. 40, <http://bit>.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Sadjadpour, “The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War,” 2011.

extends to all communities suggested that the UAE establishment did not regard Shia populations threat.¹⁰⁶⁷

The UAE's response to the murder of General Qassim Soleimani in early January 2020 proved to more than simple rhetoric as its state minister of foreign affairs pleaded to those concerned to prevent a dispute afterwards. According to him, "In light of the rapid regional developments...political solutions prevail over confrontation and escalation. The issues facing the region are complex, accumulating and suffering from a loss of confidence between the parties, and rational dealing requires a calm and emotionless approach."¹⁰⁶⁸ This stance could be the result of the reading of the UAE's regime that Washington may not come to its aid should there be an attack by Iran, given the US strategy of backing away from a military clash with Tehran amid all its rhetoric.

Moreover, on March 3rd and 16th, 2020, the UAE respectively sent 7.5 and 16 metric tons of medical supplies to Iran in an effort to curb the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁶⁹ Appeasement of an enemy is one of the strategies employed when balancing; thus, this can be seen as the UAE's effort to pacify Iran.

Since the Arab Uprisings, Bahrain's balancing act has been fully bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to balance its threat perceptions. Riyadh, on its part, provided Bahrain with financial and military aid. When Bahrain teetered in the strains of the Arab Spring, and its security became almost overwhelmed to suppress the protesters, it turned to the GCC for help. To strengthen the Bahraini regime's ability to restore order and security and protect government facilities, it invoked the collective security agreement of the GCC. On 14 March 2011, the GCC's PSF entered Bahrain. Saudi Arabia and the UAE forces participated in securing strategic locations while allowing the protesters to be crushed by the Bahraini police.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Cinzia Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics," *International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2020), pp. 92–107, doi:10.1080/03932729.2020.1742505.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Anwar Gargash, "On Twitter: 'في ظل التطورات الإقليمية المتسارعة لا بد من تغليب الحكمة والاعتزان وتغليب الحلول' / Twitter," 2020, (10/24/2020), <https://twitter.com/AnwarGargash/status/1213035692592422912>.

¹⁰⁶⁹ "UAE Sends Additional Aid to Iran in Fight against COVID-19," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation*, 06/27/2020, <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/6/27/27-06-2020-uae-iran>.

The demographic content of Bahrain, a country with about 70% Shiites¹⁰⁷⁰ ruled by a minority Sunni elite, coupled with its weak security apparatus, forced it to rely on its neighbours' mercy lest the Al-Khalifah regime falls. Moreover, given that the Arab Gulf monarchs are among the world's major oil producers, they have been able to stay in power by appeasing the masses through resources accruing from the sale of crude oil. On this ground, Bahrain has no such leverage of appeasing its masses as Saudi Arabia or the UAE did.

The current GDP of Bahrain is \$38,574 billion. In comparison, that of the UAE and Saudi Arabia stood at \$421,142 billion and \$792,967 billion, respectively (See table 16 below for a comparison of the countries' GDP). Thus, Bahrain has no leverage like Saudi Arabia or the UAE with extra money from crude sales. Manama's production depends primarily upon Saudi Arabia's generosity, which allowed it to receive half of the Abu Safah oil field's net profits. The oil from the Abu Safah field accounts for around 50 to 67% of Bahrain's total income.¹⁰⁷¹ This leaves the regime in Bahrain in Saudi Arabia's hands, an actor more able and willing to balance Iran's perceived aggression.

Table 17: the GDP and Population of the States

Countries	GDP	Population
Bahrain	38, 574	1,641,172
The UAE	421,142	9,779,529
Saudi Arabia	792,967	34,268,528

Data Source: World Bank Development Indicators

After the intervention, in May 2012, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain proposed a closer political and military alliance between the GCC states. However, the remaining members of the GCC showed no interest. In December 2016, the Gulf countries held an annual Gulf Summit in Bahrain, which reaffirmed the Gulf countries' commitment to strengthen defence integration.¹⁰⁷² In favour of Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, Bahrain also backed the effort to confront the Houthi rebels. In 2016, after the assault on the

¹⁰⁷⁰ "Middle East and North Africa Religious Affiliation by Country," 2015, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/attachments/docs/original/Middle_East_Religion_graphic_FINAL_WFB_2015.pdf?1568317873.

¹⁰⁷¹ Jodi Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement," 2019.

¹⁰⁷² Ahmed al-Masri, "GCC Meet Wraps up in Bahrain with 'Sakhir Declaration,'" *Anadolu Agency*, 12/02/2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/gcc-meet-wraps-up-in-bahrain-with-sakhir-declaration-/701498#>.

embassy buildings of Saudi Arabia in Iran, Bahrain supported Riyadh in the disagreement that ensued.¹⁰⁷³ Both countries took part in various joint naval drills to improve preparedness for war and standard functional collaboration in 2017.

Moreover, Manama has backed the Riyadh-led Qatari embargo accusing Doha of weakening the GCC due to its friendly ties with Tehran. Bahrain also took part in 2018, along with Riyadh and other countries, in the joint military exercises, the Arab Shield I.¹⁰⁷⁴ In Jordan, Bahrain with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other like-minded countries also participated in Arab security discussions to deal with regional crises.¹⁰⁷⁵

It is crucial to mention that while Bahrain embarked on balancing Iran through bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia, it allowed Iranian enterprises to work on its territories to prevent Iranian aggressions. Moreover, Manama would not openly or disproportionately condemn Tehran. It should be remembered that Bahrain also announces that it is not permitting its territories to attack Tehran's nuclear plants.

2. Explaining the Different Strategies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain in the Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen

With some of their allies, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain are involved in Yemen to balance their threat perceptions. While they all worked to intervene as a coalition, some differences can be seen in the war theatre as Saudi Arabia, and the UAE supported different groups. While both Saudi Arabia, the UAE and to some extent, Bahrain perceives the MB and political Islam as a threat, the magnitude of the threat perception is not the same for the countries. In Yemen, like in other places, the UAE's goal of tackling Iran has been second after its primary aim of fighting the Islamists. However, in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, rolling back Iran's influence is their main reason for executing the war against the Houthis. Therefore, the difference in strategy between Saudi Arabia and the UAE was noticed during the war. As Neil Quilliam averred, because Islamist current has transnational appeal and are unwilling to come to a concession with

¹⁰⁷³ "Saudi Arabia's Allies Bahrain, Sudan and UAE Act against Iran," *BBC News*, 01/04/2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35222365>.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Giorgio Cafiero, Cinzia Bianco, "Arab Shield 1': The Birth of an Arab NATO?," *Middle East Institute*, 11/13/2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/arab-shield-1-birth-arab-nato>.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Daoud Kuttub, "Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait and Jordan Hold Arab Security Talks," *Arab News*, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1445021/middle-east>.

the current political order, leaders of the UAE perceive Islamists as more threatening than Iran.¹⁰⁷⁶ Abu Dhabi perceives that the considerable number of Yemen citizens working in the UAEs police bring the likelihood of the Yemen crisis to impact UAEs security.

Furthermore, an issue of central concern to the UAE has been the future of the al-Islah party and the Yemeni MB. The UAE would not want Yemeni MB a post-war power arrangement at the end of the war because the UAE perceives MBs activism in its neighbours as a threat to its security.¹⁰⁷⁷ The UAE forces have brutalized the Islamists in the areas they control and opposed association with Al-Islah. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates depend on a coalition of militia in south Yemen. Al-Islah was the most potent adversary of the Houthis from 2011 to 2013 and was a coalition of Islamists, local militias and Salafists.

When the Saudis agreed in 2013 to join hands with the UAE to combat the MB in the region, they suspended the support al-Islah enjoyed from them,¹⁰⁷⁸ but only to start working with them again in 2015. The UAE established during the war a coalition that included fragments of the Yemeni Government forces, tribal militias (the Hadrami Elite Forces and Shabwani Elite), separatists (such as the security Belt Forces who happen to be UAE's most important ally),¹⁰⁷⁹ as well as the Salafists in south Yemen. The UAE perceive Salafi as less threatening than the MB Islamists since they are committed to the current administration.¹⁰⁸⁰

As for Saudi Arabia, with the coming of King Salman to power, and the coup that led to the reversal of the MBs progress in Egypt, there is a noticeable change in the threat perception of the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia. While before Salman, the priority was to deal with MB and political Islam, since 2015, events such as the crushing defeat of the MB, the Iran nuclear deal which emboldened Iran and its influence in the region brought about a shift in the threat perception of the regime in Saudi Arabia. The regime now perceives its greatest threat from Iran. As a result, a change in its strategies in fighting the Houthis has been recorded. Given that Saudi Arabia has no allies on the ground to fight

¹⁰⁷⁶ Neil Quilliam, 2017 in Ramani, "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears."

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring," p. 44-5

¹⁰⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷⁹ Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the Brink: How the UAE Is Profiting from the Chaos of Civil War."

¹⁰⁸⁰ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

the Houthis and sees the MB as a lesser evil than Iran, it employed MB allied or linked groups such as Islah Party in Yemen to fight the Houthis. It is noteworthy that the Saudi regime had been the supporter of al-Islah against the Yemeni government long before the Arab Uprisings and the rise of MB to fame in Egypt.¹⁰⁸¹

Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE that were at the forefront of the operations, Bahrain acted only to support the coalition against the Houthis. The name Bahrain is hardly heard or seen in the news when it comes to this operation. Yet Bahrain has been an active participant in the operations by sending its ground troops to the war theatre and contributing to the air war against the Houthis.¹⁰⁸² But what explains Bahrain less active role given that the Houthis are directly linked to its main external threat, Iran?

If one may suggest, the simple answer is that Bahrain believed Saudi Arabia and the UAE are doing the job well, even when there is no victory in sight. Bahrain is militarily and economically weak compared to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This military weakness coupled with its poor economic status as the weakest of the Gulf monarchs - oil production in Bahrain depends primarily upon Saudi Arabia's generosity.¹⁰⁸³ This will suggest a failure even if the elites in Bahrain should actively participate like the UAE or Saudi Arabia.

3. Explaining the Differing views of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Horn of Africa

Saudi Arabia and the UAE all engaged in the HoA to balance their threat perceptions; however, there are some noticeable differences. While Saudi Arabia focused on a purely economic approach to the area, the UAE went beyond the economic approach to acquire ports which are sometimes used for military purpose. The Saudi focus on the economy was also complemented with diplomatic activities involving security and peace agreements in the HoA to shelve Iran's influence in the area. Saudi Arabia signed security agreements and improved its economic cooperation with Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti. As a

¹⁰⁸¹ Dihstelhoff, Lohse, "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the 'Arab Spring,'" p. 44.

¹⁰⁸² Middle East Eye, "UAE, Bahrain Lose 45 Troops on Black Day for Yemen Coalition," *Middle East Eye*, 09/04/2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-bahrain-lose-45-troops-black-day-yemen-coalition>.

¹⁰⁸³ Vittori, "Bahrain's Fragility and Security Sector Procurement."

result of the Saudi engagement with the countries and financial aid they received, they all shifted sides to the orbit of Riyadh in its rivalry with Iran. Indeed, the move is important for Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen to counter what it considered Iran's proxy made the Horn of Africa of strategic importance for Riyadh.

However, the UAE's expansion in the HoA aims to balance not only the MB or limit the influence of Iran but also to balance Saudi Arabia. According to Miller and Verhoeven, Abu Dhabi has taken a significant direction towards pursuing its political aims to deal with its constraints in relations to its allies in the region.¹⁰⁸⁴ Indeed, this prompted the UAE to establish a network of ports that it sometimes uses as military bases on the coast of HoA.

Abu Dhabi's attempts to place under its watch the most prominent seaports of the Gulf of Aden show how aggressive it is in its regional policy. Indeed, the UAE is becoming a global trading centre linking producers and customers across the globe. The DP World operates ports that it finds to be crucial for the future both of the global economy and strategic aspirations of the emirate.¹⁰⁸⁵ The ports which have dual-use in strategic terms gives Abu Dhabi a chance to increase its geopolitical influence and becoming a powerful regional actor. As Steinberg Guido suggested, the acquisition and modernisation of ports in the HoA serve both geopolitical and commercial purpose.¹⁰⁸⁶

The ports give the UAE the advantages of expanding its strategic depth in the HoA and gives it a chance to counter its regional rivals such as Iran and Turkey and help it in its war against Islamist's expansion in Yemen and beyond. İsmail Numan Telci and Tuba Öztürk Horoz noted that "The main motivations of this policy are becoming an effective actor in regional politics, fighting against the Houthi threat in Yemen, and creating a secure corridor for oil export in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. By establishing these bases, the UAE aims to become a strategic regional player by creating a safe passage for energy supply from the Middle East to the world."¹⁰⁸⁷ Indeed, Abu Dhabi's control of ports around Aden makes it easier to intervene in Yemen. These aggressive military

¹⁰⁸⁴ Rory Miller, Harry Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 1 (2020), p. 13, doi:10.1057/s41311-019-00180-0.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *ibid.* p. 15.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner."

¹⁰⁸⁷ Telci, Horoz, "Military Bases in the Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates."

ambitions cannot be distinguished from Dubai's central conviction that trade will act as a means of economic diversification.¹⁰⁸⁸ Furthermore, the seaports managed by the DP World around the HoA mean that the UAE prevented the ports around that area from competing with Jebel Ali port.

Contrasting Saudi Arabia, where Iran is a key factor in determining its balancing strategies, war on political Islam and MB shapes the strategies used by Abu Dhabi. Moreover, the UAE quest for self-defence and its desire to take key roles in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean also guided its strategies.¹⁰⁸⁹ Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE that engaged in the HoA, Bahrain is not in a position to engage in that given its limited resources and the orientation of its leaders. For such a reason, it supported the two countries to balance its threat perceptions.

4. Explaining the Differing Stance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE Towards the Syrian Regime

During the uprisings against Bashar Al-Assad's regime in Syria, the countries used international platforms to call for the end of Assad's regime while investing millions to support demonstrators and armed insurgents against the regime. However, Abu Dhabi's policy of seeking mainly to undermine Tehran's influence in the Levant is temporary. In Abu Dhabi's assessment, Assad, who is largely reliant on Moscow, Tehran and Hezbollah, is less threatening.¹⁰⁹⁰ While Saudi Arabia and of course Bahrain prefers working with Islamist against the regime in Syria, the UAE prefers engaging the regime and also working with Kurdish forces against the growth of Turkish influence.

The Saudi elites tend to conceive of the geopolitical dispute with Iran as threatening the regime since it understands that Iran is actively working to destabilize it.¹⁰⁹¹ Replacing the Assad regime with a Sunni allied to Saudi Arabia would increase Saudi leadership's legitimacy at home and abroad in the Sunni world. Moreover,

¹⁰⁸⁸ Miller, Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," p. 16.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Alex Mello, Michael Knights, "How Eritrea Became a Major UAE Military Base," *TesfaNews*, 09/02/2016; Miller, Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," p. 15.

¹⁰⁹⁰ El-Dessouki, Mansour, "Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab Emirates' Policy towards Iran."

¹⁰⁹¹ Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East."

overthrowing Bashar al-Assad represents a reduction of Iranian regional power, and consequently, a diminishing threat to the regime. A victory over Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria could have played a vital role in Riyadh in ensuring its geopolitical interests in the Middle East and undermining the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut axis. The end of the Damascus-Tehran axis points to reducing the al-Saud's threat perception emanating from revolutionary Shi'i Islam. Political control over a Sunni Syria would represent an advancement in Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Sunni world and a setback for Iran and its agenda. It was with the fall of Assad that the Kingdom linked the weakening of Iran in the region. While analysing religious symbolism for Saudi Arabia and Iran, Zaki Samy Elakawi noted that political control of religion is essential for the internal legitimacy of the regimes in both Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as their aspirations for regional hegemonies as, “[t]his legitimacy is necessary for the concentration of power, for internal hegemony and is configured as an argument for their regional hegemonic aspirations.”¹⁰⁹² Indeed late King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz noted that “nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.”¹⁰⁹³

In that sense, based on the vital role that a pro-Iranian Syria constituted within the spectrum of internal and external threats to Riyadh, the regime campaigned to overthrow Assad. In other words, the perception of internal threat motivated the Saudi elite to become heavily involved in anti-Assad policy. Riyadh used its financial capabilities, regional and international alliances to achieve that goal to strike at the link between Iran and Hezbollah. The Saudi engagement in Syria can also be explained by the constant need to build internal legitimacy for the regime.

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi holds a less hostile position towards the Syrian regime. The UAE sees the Syrian regime as an important actor in its war against Islamists, which the UAE perceives as more threatening than Iran. This position is not similar in Saudi Arabia as it worked with Islamists in different theatres to balance Iran. The UAE is averse to Islamist as such, it opposed the assistance of Islamist insurgents in Syria by

¹⁰⁹² Zaki Samy Elakawi, “Geo-Strategic Consequences of the Arab Spring,” *OpenDemocracy*, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/geostrategic-consequences-of-arab-spring/>.

¹⁰⁹³ Alastair Crooke, “Syria and Iran: The Great Game,” *The Guardian*, 11/04/2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/nov/04/syria-iran-great-game>.

Riyadh.¹⁰⁹⁴ The gains made by ISIS in Syria in 2014 intensified Abu Dhabi's fears about the danger of terrorists and Jihadists. Abu Dhabi led the Arab world to assist Washington in the battle against ISIS. But President Obama's strategy of arming moderate rebels in Syria was strongly opposed by the UAE. As noted by its minister of states for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, the "so-called moderate Islamists are increasingly being drafted into the ranks of radical groups."¹⁰⁹⁵

Since the core aspect of Abu Dhabi is the fight against Jihadists and Islamist movements, balancing Ankara's influence in Syria becomes its main priority. In Afrin, the UAE saw Turkish-supported Islamists such as the Levant Front and the Sham Legion as a challenge to its idea of a secular state in Syria.¹⁰⁹⁶ As such, the South Front, a moderate group, was also supported by the UAE via Jordan.¹⁰⁹⁷ In 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had been funded and equipped by the UAE.¹⁰⁹⁸ Moreover, The UAE funds the Syrian Movement Tomorrow with an armed wing, the Elite Forces, which is part of the SDF.¹⁰⁹⁹

5. Explaining the UAE's More Active Stance in Libya

Unlike the UAE and Bahrain, the Saudi regime has perceived political threat from Gaddafi's actions to delegitimise the regime internally and externally. For such a reason, with its quest to maintain its status, it supported the intervention against Gaddafi. However, while the UAE participated directly by sending its fighter jets to enforcing the no-fly zone, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain did not commit their forces as the UAE. At the same time, Saudi Arabia was engrossed in Bahrain's uprisings as it is more pressing than

¹⁰⁹⁴ Hilal Khashan, "'Un-Brotherly' Saudi-Emirati Ties," *Middle East Quarterly*, 2018, <https://www.meforum.org/7227/saudi-emirates-ties>.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ian Black, "UAE's Leading Role against Isis Reveals Its Wider Ambitions," *The Guardian*, 10/30/2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/30/uae-united-arab-emirates-leading-player-opposition-isis-middle-east>.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Giorgio Cafiero, "The Afrin Factor in Turkey-UAE Relations," *LobeLog*, 09/05/2018, <https://lobelog.com/the-afrin-factor-in-turkey-uae-relations/>.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Stanford University, "The Southern Front," *Mapping Militant Organizations*, 02/13/2014, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/645>.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Matthew Yglesias, "The US Bombing of Syria Implicates Many of Trump's Business Interests," *Vox*, 04/16/2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/16/17238058/syria-bombing-trump-business-interests>; Cher-Leparrain, "The UAE Has It in for the Muslim Brotherhood."

¹⁰⁹⁹ Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the UAE: An Ideational Partnership," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2020), pp. 125–40, doi:10.1111/mepo.12479; Joseph Daher, "Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) The Dynamics and Evolution of UAE-Syria Relations: Between Expectations and Obstacles," 2019, www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/.

the threat Gaddafi poses. The UAE's participation in the initial stage aimed to create a status for itself in NATO and the USA. Indeed, the UAE has participated in various peace missions across the globe, such as in Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2007, and so on.¹¹⁰⁰

In post-Gaddafi Libya, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported Khalifa Haftar against the GNA, their commitment is not the same. As discussed above, Abu Dhabi established an airbase in Libya and also provided air support with its fighter jets and drones to Haftar.¹¹⁰¹ Moreover, despite the weapon embargo on Libya, the UAE has expanded its arms supplies to Haftar. The reason is that the UAE is more averse to Islamists than Saudi Arabia.

However, while Saudi Arabia was against the MB and political Islam, with the coup in Egypt and the growing influence of Iran, its main rival, Saudi Arabia re-evaluated its threat environment. Iran is perceived as more threatening to the regime than the MB or Islamists. This was epitomised by the way the Saudi regime is even aligning with Islamist in different countries to balance its primary threat perception. While Saudi Arabia worked with the UAE, it preferred to project its influence by working with the Madkhali-Salafi groups.¹¹⁰²

6. Explaining the Different Views of the States When it Comes to Normalisation of Ties with Israel

Faced with a common threat from Iran in particular, all the three countries have worked with Israel to balance their threat perception. As Iran's secret nuclear program surfaced and Washington's involvement in a deal that should limit Iran's nuclear enrichment and return Tehran to the world stage, the Gulf countries and Israel began to fear an increase in Iran's influence in the region. Moreover, the states are wary of declining US role interest in the region. The perceived vulnerability of the states has rallied them into secret partnerships in areas that include security.¹¹⁰³ Thus, during the nuclear talks with Iran, they both worked by putting pressure on the parties concerned

¹¹⁰⁰ Samihah Zaman, "UAE Armed Forces Have a Distinctive Peacekeeping Record," *Gulf News*, 03/02/2017, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-armed-forces-have-a-distinctive-peacekeeping-record-1.1987215>

¹¹⁰¹ Yasar, "Al-Watiya Defeat Derailed UAE's Libya Plans."

¹¹⁰² Raffaella A Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, Eduard Soler Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3367815.

¹¹⁰³ Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" pp. 139-140.

(i.e., the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) to keep the deal from going through.

On September 15, 2020, the UAE and Bahrain signed agreements in Washington to normalize relations with Israel in the Abraham Accords framework brokered by the Trump administration.¹¹⁰⁴ While Saudi Arabia improved its relations with Israel, it did not have normalized relations with the Jewish state as the UAE and Bahrain did. That may not be seen soon because formal recognition of Israel will cause a severe legitimacy problem to the regime both internally and in the Islamic world as its self-proclaimed leader. Saudi Arabia derives part of its legitimacy from the control of Islam's holy sites in Makkah and Madinah and has some influence in Islam's third holy site in Jerusalem. Moreover, the Palestinian cause has become an integral part of the Saudi regime legitimacy in the Arab and Islamic world.

Compared to the UAE or Bahrain, which play only a minor role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, normalizing relations with Israel will be a major challenge for Saudi Arabia, especially when the Palestinian case remains unsolved. Although Saudi Arabia declared that the agreement that led to the normalisation of ties between Israel and two of its allies in the Gulf is favourable, Riyadh will only recognise Israel when peace is formally achieved with the Palestinians, per the Arab Peace Initiative.¹¹⁰⁵ The cost of open relations with Israel at this time is higher than the benefit, given the position of the Arab street, which rejects relating and recognising Israel. Saudi Arabia benefits from the fact that covert, unofficial relations allowed it to align with Israel without paying the price in public opinion, which has become more voiced since the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings.

¹¹⁰⁴ Al Jazeera, "Israel, UAE and Bahrain Sign US-Brokered Normalisation Deals," *Al Jazeera*, 09/15/2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/15/israel-uae-and-bahrain-sign-us-brokered-normalisation-deals>.

¹¹⁰⁵ This is a proposal approved by the Arab League, at the 2002 Beirut Summit, with the purpose of ending the Israeli-Arab conflict, through the recognition of Israel by the Arab states, in exchange for the withdrawal Israel from the occupied territories, and Israeli acceptance of the State of Palestine.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to answer an important question about why structurally homogeneous states reacted differently to balance common threats. The dissimilarity of responses in three similar Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (geographically located in the Gulf, authoritarian, monarchical, ruled by the Sunni elite, concerned with maintaining the status quo, ensuring the longevity of their regimes and have no offensive ambitions), provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate existing theories and put forward new postulations to solve this conundrum.

Before the Arab Uprisings, the states' threat perceptions mainly came from the external environment. The states perceived threats from two militarily stronger states (Iran and Iraq) with their hostile hegemonic ambitions, which the states cannot deter with their weak military. Thus, all the states engaged in armaments to balance threats while aligning with the sources of threats, especially in times of crisis. The Arab Uprisings affected threat perceptions by reactivating its internal dimension. While an internal dimension of threat perception has existed for the regimes since their inception, the uprisings that began in 2010 changed the threat primarily to an internal one. The internal threat is reinforced by the link between the perception of external and internal threats, which implies a threat to regime survival.

Given the ability of other states to meddle in the internal affairs of states, the threat perceptions of the regimes, which covers both internal and external perceptions, directly affect the regimes instead of the state. Domestically, the Arab Uprisings sparked dissent, especially with the rise to power of the MB and the Islamist Ennahda in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively. There is also the perception of a threat from non-state violent actors such as ISIS and other militia groups supported by Iran. Thus, regime survival supplanted the former understanding of state survival as the driving force of balancing strategies of the states.

Balance of threat and Omnibalancing theories explain the threat perceptions and responses of the states during regional upheavals before the Arab Uprisings and Since the Arab Uprisings, respectively. However, to explain the central question of the research that aimed to solve the puzzle of different response to similar threats by similar states, the

work went further and added some unit-level variables peculiar to the states that intervene to explain the differences. Theoretically, the work contributed to the literature by adding some left out variables in the studies of threats and balancing strategies. Both the balance of threat and Omnibalancing theories explain the threat perceptions and balancing strategies of the states. However, they fail to explain the impact the unit-level variables may have on the balancing strategies of states. The work added these unit-level idiosyncrasies peculiar to states to better grasp responses to similar threats.

Therefore, the main finding of this research is that, although states perceive similar threats, some unit-level idiosyncrasies unique to them, such as demographic composition, leaders' perceived role, financial leverage, determine the nature and magnitude of threat perception. The above unit-level features also explain why states that perceive similar threats reacted differently. These factors do not indicate that a state's unique character is the main reason it prefers a policy. However, they illustrated why a state behaved in this way and not the other.

Another finding is that even when the states follow similar strategies to balance their threats, their commitment is not the same. For example, during the Iran-Iraq War, the countries all aligned to Iraq; however, only Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided the material support. This has shown that the level of the threat alone is not enough to explain why Bahrain was list committed. Bahrain is more threatened because it was directly aimed at by Iranian revolutionaries. The reason why Bahrain could not be equal to Saudi Arabia or the UAE in balancing has to do with its less economic leverage. Bahrain is the weakest and has inadequate resources accruing from crude oil sales compared to the two states. So, it is safe to say that a state with less economic leverage tends to free ride especially when its ally has a vested interest in securing it.

Before the Arab Uprisings, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain's balancing behaviours constituted both internal and external efforts. Within the internal efforts, the countries embarked on armament through military expenditure and arms transfers to counter their weakness, vis-à-vis their threat perceptions. However, in times of crisis, the states allied to balance their threats perceptions. Balancing threats emanating from Iran and Iraq constitute regional alignment through the GCC, at times shifting alignments between the critical threats and the formation of extra-regional alignments, in the form of

more military cooperation with the West, the USA in particular. All the countries maintained some form of security agreements with the US, granting it access to military facilities, which serve as a form of guarantee to balance their threat perceptions. However, Saudi Arabia could not formally sign a Defence Cooperation Agreement like Bahrain and the UAE, given the sentiments in its streets. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia maintained military relations with Washington even before the creation of the UAE and Bahrain.

Having a marginalised majority Shia population explains why Bahrain under the al-Khalifa is open to foreign manipulation by Iran and heavily rely on external protection. The al-Khalifa regime relies on the support of Saudi Arabia to maintain its power and prevent Iran from mobilizing its Shiite majority. Thus, the regime in Bahrain has no alternative than to comply with Saudi Arabia's stance on regional issues. While the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia worked together to balance their threat perceptions by aligning towards their threat perceptions and maintaining the US as their security guarantor, some differences were noticed in how they aligned to their protectors.

From its independence, Bahrain relied on the protection of foreigners due to the nature and magnitude of its threat perceptions and its limited resources where it was unable to build a military as strong as the UAE or Saudi Arabia as an effective way of balancing its adversaries. Moreover, due to its lack of adaptability to the plight of the masses, which in most cases, constitute majority downtrodden Shiites, it failed in finding a permanent solution to the crisis in its internal environment. Therefore, Manama relied on the security umbrella of Saudi Arabia, the GCC and outside protectors heavily for its security and stability. During the Iran-Iraq war, Bahrain supported Saudi Arabia's alignment with Iraq. At the same time, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Manama worked it its regional guarantor, the international coalition and at the same time found itself on the same page with Iran to balance Iraq.

Although the UAE has a long-running territorial dispute with Iran, it held an officially neutral position during the Iran-Iraq War. Nevertheless, it aligned with Saudi Arabia to bankroll Saddam, another rival from which the states perceive threats but decided to align to Saddam because of the magnitude of threat perception. This balancing strategy aligns with Walt's argument that if potential allies of a state are approximately equal in strength, then per the theory of balance of threats in this circumstance, states

conclude an alliance with the least dangerous side. Thus far, to explain further, it is necessary to look into some unit-level character that distinguished the UAE from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and how that affects its balancing strategy.

The UAE is always cautious in how it acts toward Iran for reasons connected to the nature of threats they perceive, which has no direct link to its internal politics as in Bahrain or even Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the threat of Iran in the UAE varies as each of the seven federating emirates perceives it differently. While Abu Dhabi holds a hostile position towards Iran, Dubai is not hostile to Iran. For instance, during the Iran-Iraq War, it was the emirate of Abu Dhabi that financially supported Saddam. Dubai's accommodating position is linked to the historical and commercial ties it shares with Tehran. The commercial link makes Dubai and Tehran so interdependent that Iran is one of its major trading partners in the region. The UAE's political system, as discussed above, and Dubai's commercial link to Iranian businesses play a role in the way the UAE responds to threats it perceived from Tehran, which makes it difficult for the emirates to hold a unified view of the threat it perceives from Iran.

Saudi Arabia's balancing behaviour during the turmoil that ensued after the Iranian revolution was guided by the way it perceived threat from the Iranian revolution. Saudi Arabia's choice of balancing Iran by aligning to Iraq can be understood to have come from the perceptions of threat from the aggressive Iranian intentions and offensive capability, which translates to its power to stir uprisings in and around the Saudi state since the 1979 revolution. Indeed, Iran used tools such as the rhetoric of delegitimizing the Saudi monarchy and its attempt to export its revolution threatened Saudi Arabia. The threat was complicated because Saudi Arabia has many Shiites in its eastern province who found the revolution in Iran worthy of emulation. The perception factor played a significant role in determining Saudi Arabia's supporting Iraq against Iran during the war. Iran no doubt constituted threat which has both external and internal effect on Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's alignment to Iraq during the Iraq Iran war could be seen in Saudis' perception of Baghdad as less aggressive. At the same time, during the Gulf War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, it was the perception of a direct threat from Iraq that compelled Saudi Arabia to align with Iran, which is in line with the argument that states can accommodate the rise of a nonaggressive neighbour.

With the Arab Uprisings that began in late 2010, the threat to the regimes changed. During the regional turmoil, the perception of internal threat among the regimes became more discernible than an external one, although the internal threat is related to the external environment. Initially, irrespective of the magnitude of threat perception, the reaction of the regimes was similar, given their commitment to the GCC alliance. Since the regimes are united by a similar threat that directly affects their status quo of regime survival, any threat affecting one of them is considered a threat to all. As a consequence of the increasing link between domestic and external threats, a foreign policy with an aggressive and defensive structure was formed, adopting an eminently reactionary stance in the face of the various threats to their stability and regime survival.

In the internal environment, the countries have pursued similar strategies, such as the crackdown on dissents by using state apparatuses such as the police and military; doling out palliatives to the masses to buy support; making some minor reforms to adapt to some of the demands of the protestors, and armament to balance the immediate threats confronting their regimes as perceived. In the external environment, the states took measures such as adhering to alliances in the regional and extra-regional levels; supporting like-minded regimes facing rebellion; and meddling in the countries they believe are linked to their internal source of threat, to counter their threat perceptions.

However, the ouster of MB in Egypt, the rise of Iranian influence and the declining US presence in the Middle East has played a role in how the states responded to their threat perceptions. One crucial point to keep in mind is how the countries prioritize threats. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain perceived Iranian influence in the region as more dangerous than political Islam or the MB. However, the UAE is more concerned about the rise to power of Islamists in the region. For instance, the MB has a stake in the survival of the al-Khalifa regime. Therefore, it played an essential role in safeguarding the regime during the 2011 upheaval. Saudi Arabia has worked with MB in other countries such as Yemen to balance Iran. At the same time, the UAE fought the MB, where it agreed to work with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to root out Iran's proxy in Yemen. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursued varying strategies to balance their threat perception directly or indirectly in different theatres such as Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and the Horn of Africa. Indeed, the unit-level idiosyncrasies that distinguished the states played a role in balancing threats in the external environment in particular.

In terms of demographic characteristics, irrespective of the period, since the danger to states is one of the hostile motives reflected in their rival's rhetoric and meddling, a state ruled by a Sunni elite with a more significant marginalised Shia population is likely to perceive more threats to its authority than states with a smaller economically integrated Shia population. To exemplify this, the scale of the demonstrations in Bahrain is more than the protests in Saudi Arabia, while the UAE has seen no protests in terms of street demonstrations. At the same time, Bahrain's demographics of the Shia majority and its inadequacy in cash to pacifying its Shia majority illustrates why it was more vulnerable to Iranian subversion than other states. Consequently, to guarantee its survival, it preferred to align its policies with Saudi Arabia rather than directly confronting its threat. As long as bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia will ensure the survival of the al-Khalifa regime, little attention is paid if such an action harms the state and its people.

Since the governments are authoritarian and, in most instances, rentier in nature, the higher a country's economic status, the better it can handle internal oppositions and vice versa. Regimes that are faced with internal resistance appeased their critics by sharing resources derived from crude oil. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have effectively controlled internal resistance, while Bahrain has struggled due to its weak economy. As the leading receiver of the financial aid from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two countries become so influential in Bahrain's political and economic life as seen in its choices of supporting Saudi Arabia's regional endeavours while also bandwagoning with the UAE, as evidenced in normalization of ties with Israel.

The Saudi regime felt more threatened than the UAE because of the involvement of Shiites, which the regime viewed as being exploited by Iran against it and its leader's view on what constitutes security and influence. Saudi Arabia regards itself as the Islamic world's leader; as such, anything that can challenge that status quo should be deemed a threat. As a result, regionally, with the decline of American influence in the area, it chooses a balancing approach because it has the tools to balance its threat perception. It can be suggested that where a security guarantor is not willing to come to the aid of a regime, the regime may pursue other measures such as directly engaging the source of threats, meddling in the affairs of a state posing a threat, supporting uprisings against a leader, shoring up allies and like-minded regimes, among others, to maintain its survival.

Indeed, the states took their balancing strategy to the extent of fighting the war in Yemen, and supporting groups against their sources of threat, though with the tacit approval of their foreign security guarantor.

In the UAE, while there is the fear that the Shiites are economically integrated can be a fifth column against the government, as opposed to Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, the internal component to the threat perception of Iran is weak. While working with Saudi Arabia to deal with the threats they face, the UAE has pursued a strategy unilaterally conceded due to its historical ties to Iran and economic interests in the region and beyond. The UAE maintenance of commercial relations with Iran, which is a source of threat, can be regarded as appeasing Iran “to conserve strength for the battle against the prime threat”,¹¹⁰⁶ which is in the form of appeasing the less threatening external threat to focus more energy in dealing with a primary domestic threat (i.e., political Islam). The leader’s balancing behaviour is based on what will keep and enhance their power against the internal and external threats they perceived.

According to the omnibalancing theory, the countries should consider bandwagoning with what they perceived to be affecting their survival in their domestic environment (Iran and the MB in Egypt). However, such a balancing behaviour that could be classified as bandwagoning did not occur. For instance, none of the states bandwagoned with Iran; instead, they choose to work together to balance their threat perception, albeit defecting on some issues in the case of the UAE. It is important to note that the states maintenance of a good relationship with Tehran only comes when Iran moderates its behaviours. Moreover, instead of aligning with the MB in Egypt, they orchestrated a coup against the MB. Saudi Arabia’s preference of working with MB affiliated groups against Iranian influence resulted from the reassessment of its threat perception following the coup against MB in Egypt.

Reliance on secondary data is one obvious limitation that suggests further research is needed on this work. Interviewing the political elites in the Gulf will allow us to establish what threats are more perceived by the leaders, and therefore lead us away from speculating or interpreting a given response to how a threat is perceived.

¹¹⁰⁶ David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” p. 236.

Moreover, while the countries share many similarities, there is an apparent imbalance in their strength, which also plays a role in their balancing behaviours. Saudi Arabia alone is two times larger than all the Gulf states of the GCC, aside from the UAE and Bahrain paired up for comparison. Since all states in the GCC share a common strategic vulnerability and have much in common beyond their sometimes-conflicting regional position, comparing states with similar capabilities should address this limitation.



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