

2022

The Gulf Cooperation Council's Policies towards Iran

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ABSTRACT

THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL'S POLICIES TOWARDS IRAN

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As the world moves forward in its efforts towards maintaining global security and peace, we witness that many nations face challenges while forming alliances as they encounter threats from neighboring states. The study of alliance formation in the field of international relations is mostly centered around the concept of security, however this thesis will highlight the importance of considering other factors that influence alliance formation such as religion and economy. The thesis will discuss the case of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council in dealing with the neighboring Islamic Republic of Iran which is considered a threat to regional and global security since its establishment.

The Islamic revolution of 1979 changed the security and social landscape of the Middle East region leading to the rise of key challenges that include the spread of sectarian narratives, extremist groups, proxy wars and decades of conflict in the region. The revolution led the Arab Gulf states into the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council as an alliance, however their policies towards Iran vary. The thesis will reflect the different policies of the Gulf states towards Iran based on security, religion and economy.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DE KALB, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2022

THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL'S POLICIES TOWARDS IRAN

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Thesis Director:
Ches Thurber

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee chair Dr. Ches Thurber for his support and guidance throughout the course of my thesis. I would also like to thank my committee members Dr. Aarie Glas and Dr. Colin Kuehl for their valuable efforts and suggestions that have helped me in completing this thesis successfully.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My thesis is centred around the attitudes of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states towards Iran. Gulf-Iranian relations have witnessed periods of dramatic changes since the 1979 Islamic revolution (Ighani 2016). There is variation in the policies of the states as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are involved in a proxy war with Iran, Qatar and Kuwait maintain stronger trade and diplomatic relations while Oman has always chosen the path of nonalignment and diplomacy.

One of the main principles behind the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council as a treaty organisation was to form an alliance and unify the policies of the six states against foreign aggression (Qureshi 1982). However, the Gulf Cooperation Council has failed to unify its policy towards Iran.

I will base my thesis on International Relations literature on alliance formation that describes the tendency of states to balance and bandwagon with regional hegemons (Walt 1985). I will be describing the variation in policies among the Gulf states as balancers or those confronting Iran and hedgers those with stronger relations. None of the Gulf states are bandwagoning within the context presented by the balance of threat theory. The research will show that the behaviour of the smaller weaker states is different than what is anticipated by the theory. As the theory argues that smaller states hedge and choose the path of peace, this research reflects that smaller states can be confrontational. The case of the Gulf countries shows that the

smallest state Bahrain is confrontational while Oman, a bigger less vulnerable state chooses to continuously hedge.

The alliance formation literature stresses that the policy choices of states are centered on security. I propose two other factors; religion and economy as factors that shape foreign policy in addition to security. The IR literature is also mainly focused on external security threats. In this research I will shed light on the importance of considering internal threats as a factor in shaping alliances. The expansionist agenda of the Islamic revolution is considered a threat to the regimes of all six nations (Qureshi 1982). The rise of the Islamic republic in the decades following the revolution created both external and internal threats to the Gulf nations. The internal threat represented in the spread of Shia ideological narratives and solid support for Shia opposition elements across the Gulf and an external threat through military expansion, nuclear aspirations and proxy wars. Iran's complete control over Iraqi politics following the US invasion and continuous support for militia groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen is an expanding external threat, its nuclear deal with the US and the west is also one of the major external threats to the security of the Gulf states, which consider the notion of a nuclear Iran as a danger to the region (Amin 2015). The nature of threats being faced is different for the Gulf states and hence the policy choices and responses towards Iran have changed over time, leaving some to be confrontational and others to be more lenient.

While security is a main pillar of shaping foreign policy and alliance formation, this thesis will explore the importance of factors such as religion and economy that are not set forward as important factors in International Relations literature.

I will present a systematic case study analysis of the three factors shaping the GCC member states policies towards Iran; Security, Religion and Economy. I will put forward three

different hypotheses around the explanatory factors and base my findings for each country around the hypotheses.

The organisation of the thesis will proceed as follows; Chapter 2 will present the existing and alternative explanations and arguments that describe the behaviour of states in relation to alliance formation. This section will be divided into the three explanatory factors for the policies of the states; security, religion and economy. Chapter 3 will describe the research design and the case selection. Chapter 4 will include the table of findings and the case studies of the six GCC states. Chapter 4 will conclude with a description of the findings of the case studies and the table. Chapter 5 will be dedicated to the conclusion.

The issue of Gulf relations with Iran is vital to several key dynamics across the globe, considering the rise of extremist narratives and security threats from and within this region that affect the world as a whole. As members of the treaty organisation, the six GCC states are bound by several agreements and had previously established a norm of unified diplomatic stances (Laiq 1986). However, Iran presents a case to which the member states have made different policy choices rather than a unified policy.

Strengthening trade and security relations among the states as part of the GCC agreements is considered work towards a strengthened unit that can face any form of foreign aggression (Qureshi 1982).

Different policies towards Iran

Three of the six Gulf states; Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain are small in geographic size and with limited military defense capacities in comparison to the larger states in the region. Hence a form of unity through a treaty organisation has strengthened their position in the face of any growing threats (Qureshi 1982). Although all Gulf countries maintained relatively balanced

relations with Iran through diplomatic ties and continued talks for around three decades, a shift in attitudes towards Iran has been witnessed in recent years (Ighani 2016). While some countries got more confrontational others have chosen a friendlier approach. These different policies of the Gulf states in dealing with Iran in what was seemingly a shared common interest and shared threat is an issue that will be highlighted in this research. The policies of the Gulf states have an effect on the standing of the Gulf Cooperation Council as a unit.

Due to the increasing tensions in the region resulted from Iran and Saudi Arabia's regional hegemonic aspiration and Saudi Arabia's leading role in the Gulf Cooperation Council, it would have been expected to witness a unified Gulf policy towards Iran (Windecker and Sendrowicz 2015). My research question is "Why have the Gulf Cooperation Council states chosen different policies towards Iran?". The six states are evidently reflecting different behaviours in dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran. My dependent variable is the different approaches or policy choices of the Gulf states. While some of the states have chosen to be more *confrontational*, others continue to engage with Iran, the policy choices are puzzling. Therefore, I will be dividing the six states into two groups, the first group will be named balancers and the second named hedgers. The six Gulf nations share many common characteristics such as culture, economic status and religion, however their neighbouring regional power Iran has presented them with challenges due to its policy and different political, historical and cultural characteristics (Mumtaz 2005). The geographic proximity of Iran to the Gulf states and their historical tensions makes the issue of their relations an important factor for the future of the Middle East region. Iran is considered a growing power and a threat due to its nuclear and hegemonic aspirations. The Gulf states feel the threat of Iran's religious, military and economic

dominance over the region and the Islamic world. The formation of the GCC as a unit was a reflection of a measure taken to face this growing threat (Qureshi 1982).

The doctrine of Iran's Islamic revolution cites the necessity to export the revolution, this has hence presented an existential threat to the monarchies of the Gulf. The relations of the Gulf states and Iran reflect on the wider region to states such as; Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon where both the Gulf and Iran have interests (Amin 2015). Therefore, all chosen policies have their implications on the current state of affairs and the future of the region. The whole region is also a matter of importance to world powers such as the United States and others, the US' naval presence in the Gulf waters reflects the importance of these regional relations to global politics as they affect international security and trade (Gause 2016). The nature of relations with Iran also affects the internal relations within the Gulf Cooperation Council as a unit (Zaccara 2019). A unified foreign policy can serve the organisation positively. However, the difference in policies that include friendlier attitudes of some nations can also have an impact on future peace talks, mediation and negotiations with a threatening power like Iran.

I will be looking more specifically into the policy choices of the smaller Gulf states who have reflected shifts in their policies across time. The starting point for policy changes towards Iran is the 1979 Islamic revolution that created a drastic change in the dynamics of Gulf-Iran relations following regime change. Therefore, the scope of my study will cover the factors and events affecting policy choices in a period of more than forty years since 1979.

CHAPTER TWO

Existing and Alternative Explanations

My research will propose that the attitudes of these countries towards neighbouring Iran are shaped by three factors security, religion and economy. Hence, I will provide a description of the security challenges being faced and religious aspects and disputes that are reflected in the Sunni/Shia divide, in addition to economic ties. The Gulf states have moved in different directions in dealing with Iran over time (Windecker and Sendrowicz 2015). The initial stage of the Gulf's formation does not reflect direct confrontational policies towards Iran; hence all Gulf states were hedgers and some states changed policies over time. The security and religious factors shaped the changes in the policies of the states hence leading a group to continue hedging while others became balancers and confronted Iran. Both external and internal threats faced by the Gulf countries play a role in shaping their policies towards Iran.

Security

International relations literature explains that countries choose two different approaches while building alliances (Walt 1985). Stephen Walt's theory of alliance formation describes these approaches as balancing Vs bandwagoning. Hence, the groups of states in my research will be divided along these lines, *balancers Vs hedgers*. Hedging is considered as taking contradicting steps and policies to maintain relations with another power (Lake 1996). Confrontation (balancing) is the formation of an alliance to oppose the threats of a growing power (Walt 1985). In my research, the *balancers* are more confrontational, less diplomatic and

reflect an aggressive approach while the *hedgers* have taken a friendlier, less confrontational, more diplomatic approach. In this case confrontation is also through conflict and proxy wars. None of the countries are bandwagoning with Iran in the way described by Walt, hence *hedging* provides the best description for the policy choices of the hedger countries. Hedging is also described by the presence of diplomatic and trade relations.

Balancers create an alliance to oppose the activities of the threatening power and to protect themselves (Walt 1985). The balance of threat theory describes balancing as alignment with the weaker side and bandwagoning as an alliance with the stronger. However, my research presents a region with two powerful states, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The balancers are led by one of the growing powers at hand against another growing power that is considered a threat. Threat represented in security challenges is a decisive factor in the foreign policy choices of both the balancers and hedgers.

Hedging is viewed as a rational pragmatic approach when both stakes and uncertainty are high (Kuik 2021). By becoming hedgers, smaller states keep their options open while collaborating with both growing powers at hand (Kuik 2021). The three smaller member states of the GCC are Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. Kuwait and Qatar fall under the category of hedgers in my research; however, Bahrain shows a different more puzzling stance as it is the smallest state that has chosen to be a balancer rather than a hedger. On the other hand, one of the larger states Oman has chosen a policy of hedging rather than confrontation. There is no consensus on the definition of hedging in International Relations literature, hence the concept remains to be fluid. States base their hedging policy on three elements; developing strong relations with both powers at hand, maximising their protection under uncertainty and keeping all their options open for as long as possible (Kuik 2021). The conceptualisation of hedging that provides the most suitable

understanding of the concept is that hedging is an insurance seeking behaviour centred around three attributes. The attributes are; not taking sides or being locked in a rigid alignment, taking contradicting measures across security, political and economic domains and diversifying a fallback position (Kuik 2021).

Another interesting aspect of the attitudes of the Gulf states is that International Relations literature states that hedging is the behaviour of weaker smaller states towards a greater power (Walt 1985). However, the case of the Gulf countries is different as one of the smaller states (Bahrain) is a balancer and one of bigger states (Oman) is a hedger.

International Relations literature on alliance formation and foreign policy choices is mostly centred around the idea that they are in response to power dynamics. The balance of threat theory emphasises that weaker states bandwagon with the hegemon and in the context of my case studies, Saudi Arabia is considered as the greater power or the hegemon within the Gulf. However, the weaker states some of whom are hedgers have neither formed an alliance against or completely bandwagoned with Saudi Arabia or else their foreign policies would have been aligned with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the theory does not address the behaviour of weaker states that neither balance nor bandwagon with the hegemon in some cases, as they choose to hedge with all growing powers. The below hypothesis is based on the topic presented above:

H 1 - States that are more vulnerable are more likely to hedge

The vulnerability of states is based on their geographic size and independent military strength without taking into account the presence of external military forces.

Religion

Relational theory explains the religious dynamic of the policy choices of the countries. The theory emphasises that actors decide based on their relational circles and environments (Qin

2016). Actors in both groups of countries (the state) are basing their policies towards Iran on a relational context. Relational theory describes that states can act along cultural lines, the cultural sensitivities and relations created by officials and community leaders in Iran and hedger states can play a role in maintaining good relations. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have witnessed troubles with the Shia community in the past few decades. Religious rivalry and the lack of strong relations between Saudi Arabia and the Shia community are reflected on its relations with Iran. Kuwait's tolerance towards its Shia community and the relations between the Kuwaiti ruling family and Shia citizens creates a platform for a policy of hedging (Ghabra 2104). The same idea is reflected in Oman that has always reflected a policy of tolerance, respect and good relations with its neighbours including Iran (O'Reilly 1998).

A country's religious heritage affects its foreign policy orientation and who it considers as its enemies and allies (Warner and Walker 2011). Being viewed as the patron of the Shia population across the Muslim world, the Islamic regime in Iran was capable of building strong relations with the Shia community across the region. Hence paving the way for relations to be an important factor that has affected policy making both in Iran and its Arab neighbours towards it.

The relations established by the Islamic republic with Shia groups in Gulf states reflects differently on policy making in these states. A balancer state like Bahrain frowns upon the relations of its opposition organisations with Iran and hence it decides to become confrontational (Friedman 2012). On the other hand, relations with the Shia business elite in Kuwait, reflects positively on the ruling family that considers the Shia elite as its allies who are loyal to the regime, therefore influencing friendlier official relations between Kuwait and Iran (Ghabra 1997).

Relations between Iran and some elements of the Shia population in Gulf countries also promote sectarian narratives and hence affect the policies of these states towards Iran. Some states may limit their relations with Iran in order to limit the level of interaction between their Shia population and the Islamic republic to avoid further influence and instability, considering the presence of religious sectarian narratives, extremists and even militia training in Iran. The relations between actors in Saudi Arabia and Iran are weaker than some other states. Groups such as Hezbollah Al Hijaz that were supported by Iran created another obstacle for positive relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, due to their involvement in terrorist activities in the 1980s (Gaub 2016).

Relational theory stresses that the world of international relations is based on interrelatedness (Qin 2016). The relational circles created by social relations links actors to each other. This in turn affects the politics of policy and decision making as actors base their actions on relations (Qin 2016). Therefore, relations built upon religious and sectarian affiliations in the context of Gulf- Iran relations can play a role in the way Iran is perceived and treated by the Gulf states.

Religion plays an important role in the relations of these countries. An increase in the religious divide in the region between the Shias and Sunnis has an impact on state policies. The fall of Saddam Hussein and the sectarian war in Iraq following the US invasion led Iraqi politics to be heavily influenced by Iran, hence raising the threat towards the Sunni-Arab Gulf states and increasing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Alterman 2007). Iran has repeatedly announced its will to share the patronage of the holy city of Mecca and the Islamic annual Haj pilgrimage, an idea that is completely rejected by Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Gulf neighbours.

The religious divide is an important factor that is considered in the policy choices of some of the Gulf states.

The sustainability and future of the GCC as a cooperative organisation is easily influenced by policies towards Iran, especially while considering that the relations between Qatar and Iran were one of the main factors concerning the fellow member states' decision to boycott Qatar in 2017 (Zaccara 2019). A positive aspect of the divide within the GCC towards Iran is that the hedgers can mediate future talks between the balancers and Iran, while they continue to maintain more positive relations with the Islamic republic, hence this could pave the way for maintaining peace in the region. The hypothesis below is based on the topic presented above:

H- 2: States with a larger Shia population are more likely to balance

The likeliness of balancing is due to limiting further interaction and Iran's religious influence over the population of the states.

Economy

Economy and trade relations are another factor that can shape foreign policy choices. Self-interest based on trade relations has a direct effect on interstate relations (Barbieri 1996). In this case, one could argue that the economic interest of the hedgers in maintaining relations with Iran is prioritised over taking a unified confrontational stance with the balancers. The hedgers could also be bound by economic and trade relations that makes maintaining good relations at their best interest, however the balancers do not witness such economic ties with Iran. Economic agreements and plans for further economic ties have remained unaffected between some states and Iran despite a history of tense relations. The economic interests of the states are different and hence their policy decisions are different despite their membership in a treaty organisation that was initially established to protect their collective interest. Economic and trade relations link the

hedger states with Iran more than the others, hence shaping some form of interdependence with Iran. The geographic proximity of the countries to Iran makes trade agreements and cooperation over issues such as gas pipelines etc a key factor in their relations. Hence, some of the hedger states have structural economic interdependence with Iran where the characteristics are unchangeable and are fundamental drivers of their economy. This in turn creates inevitable relations between Iran and some of the hedger states that is equally beneficial to both. The below hypothesis is based on the topic presented above:

H- 3: States that have structural economic interdependence are more likely to hedge

Structural economic interdependence is shaped by unchangeable characteristics such as shared natural resources.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design: Methods and Case Selection

In my case selection I have divided the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council into two groups. *Balancers* (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates) and *Hedgers* (Kuwait, Qatar and Oman). I will be presenting six case studies and describing the three factors that shape the attitudes of the two groups of states. The three factors are security, religion and economy. I will describe the factors within each case study and will test my findings around the three hypotheses presented.

Security will include a description of security conflicts and the proxy wars that involves the countries. It will also include a description of organisations in these countries that are associated with Iran and some of their activities (Fayazi 2017). Territorial disputes with Iran will also be included as part of security challenges faced by some of the countries as some of these states witness territorial disputes. Examples of these disputes are ongoing claims over a number of islands between the United Arab Emirates and Iran and Iran's continuous claims over Bahrain which creates a threat to the sovereignty of these nations and creates incentive for confrontation (Gaub 2016).

I have divided the states into two groups as the lack of a unified stance is evident. While the balancers are involved in confrontational activities with Iran, the hedgers are not. This is one of the reasons behind dividing the states into two groups. The hedger states are not involved in the Saudi led coalition in Yemen. Qatar was expelled from the coalition following the Saudi led

boycott in 2017 (Zaccara 2019). Oman and Kuwait are also not part of the coalition hence this puts them in the non-confrontational hedger camp. The main indicator of balancing is military confrontation. Hedging is indicated by a range of issues that include diplomatic relations, official visits and economic ties. Kuwait has maintained relations with Iran despite several incidents that could have caused a rift between the two countries. Kuwait expelled Iranian diplomats in 2011 following accusations of espionage and support for terror cells, however this diplomatic rift was brief. The relations between the two countries were not strongly affected by such an incident (Windecker and Sendrowicz 2015). Oman and Iran practice shared sovereignty on the strait of Hormuz despite the economic benefits that could have potentially caused a conflict between the two states (Windecker and Sendrowicz 2015). On the other hand, the territorial disputes with the UAE are still an issue at hand as the two states do not share sovereignty over the islands that are under Iran's control.

I will provide a description of the dynamics of the religious conflict between Iran and the two groups of states, that will mainly be reflected in the Sunni-Shia conflict (Mumtaz 2005). A description of the sectarian population across the region is a key factor that influences policy choices. For instance, in the balancer states such as Bahrain, actors (political organisations, Shia religious communities) that are aligned with the Islamic republic have failed in maintaining good relations with the regime while being involved in regime opposition activities. In the hedger states, actors aligned with Iran are either absent or have maintained strong relations or support for the regime, hence preventing any ideological and religious conflict with the state that can reflect on its relations with the Islamic republic, however the situation varies even within each group. The religious factor plays a role in the Saudi -Iran relations as Saudi Arabia is considered the patron of Sunni Islam and home to the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina which gives

it prominence in the Muslim world (Litvak 2017). While Iran on the other hand is considered the patron of Shia Muslims and is a theocratic regime that promotes Shia Islam along with its radical elements (Farzamand 1995). The Sunni – Shia rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the factors behind the hegemonic ambitions of both nations in the region (Litvak 2017). I will also base my findings on the diplomatic ties between the countries. This will reflect the level of confrontation and hedging.

Why is religion perceived as a threat?

Religion is perceived as a threat across the Gulf states for several reasons. The Islamic revolution brought to life power of a minority group in the Islamic world, considering that Sunnis represent 85-90% of the world's Muslim population and the Shia are a minority (Holtmann 2014). The region and the world had not witnessed a Shia state of such form until the Islamic revolution, noting that Shah's regime was secular and enjoyed relatively peaceful relations with its Arab gulf neighbours. The sudden change in state ideology and the social and political revolution in Iran which imposed a strict and extreme version of Shia Islam on Iranian society and politics sent a shockwave through the region. Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine and acts and Iran's resources and military might from the Shah's reign presented a challenge as it was under the control of religious extremists that are considered infidels and non-believers according to some schools of Sunni Islam mostly practiced in Saudi Arabia, namely Wahabism and Salafism (Sajedi 1993). Therefore, a certain level of religious animosity exists between the Sunnis and Shias that led to the spread of Anti Shia rhetoric in the region following the Islamic revolution (Ighani 2016). All the Gulf states are Sunni monarchies that considered the Shah a careful secular western minded ally who would settle his disputes diplomatically (Mumtaz 2005). Hence, the sudden change in regime in Iran presented the Gulf states with challenges of

dealing with a newly established theocratic regime that was ideologically and religiously extremely opposite to theirs. Announcing the revolution as an Islamic revolution and stating that exporting the revolution is part of the revolution's doctrine created a path through which religion was perceived as a threat in the Gulf region.

The Islamic revolution created a theocratic state that is considered the patron of Shia Islam, under the rule of the Supreme leader (Holtmann 2014). This notion is one that creates a threat as Iran post 1979 is not just viewed as a political power but is viewed as a religious power with a political religious supreme leader that is considered as the Pope of Shia Islam, despite the existence of many different Shia schools of thought. Therefore, the merge of political and religious ideology into one entity under the Islamic republic presents a threat as many Shia Muslims across the region view the Supreme leader of Iran as a religious leader that also holds utmost power over another nation. This issue creates loyalty shifts and national identity crises for conservative Shias who are loyal to their faith and their school of thought which is represented by a religious political power, the Supreme leader of Iran. For the Arab Gulf states, it is perceived as a threat due to the growing influence of this ideology over their Shia population (Windecker and Sendrowicks 2015). The threat was magnified as Iran is also accused of playing a leading role in supporting terrorism for strategic purposes (Fayazi 2017). Religion post 1979 has created a threat due to Iran's creation and direct support for Shia militias including Hezbollah in Lebanon, hence leaving the Gulf states alarmed by such acts of the Islamic republic that undermines their security and stability.

CHAPTER FOUR

Case Studies

Table 1. The Different Factors Shaping the Policies of the GCC States Towards Iran

EXPLANATORY FACTORS	BAHRAIN	QATAR	KUWAIT	OMAN	UAE	KSA
SECURITY	Vulnerable	Vulnerable	Vulnerable	Not Vulnerable	Not Vulnerable	Not Vulnerable
RELIGION	Large Shia Population	No Shia Population	Large Shia Population	No Shia Population	No Shia Population	Low Shia Population
ECONOMY	Not Dependent	Dependent	Not Dependent	Dependent	Not Dependent	Not Dependent
POLICY	<i>Balancer</i>	<i>Hedger</i>	<i>Hedger</i>	<i>Hedger</i>	<i>Balancer</i>	<i>Balancer</i>

Note. The yellow boxes mark inconsistency with the hypothesis. The blue boxes mark the cases that are unclear.

State of Qatar

Qatar is the second smallest member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Qatar is an absolute monarchy ruled by the Al Thani Sunni tribe and was a British protectorate that gained independence in 1971. It has an estimated population of 2.5 million of which 88.4% are expatriates.

Qatar is a hedger as it is not involved in any current military confrontation with Iran. It has structural economic interdependence with Iran due to shared natural gas fields, in addition to other trade ties and diplomatic relations. There is no significant Shia population in Qatar.

The case of Qatar is consistent with all three hypotheses. Qatar's policy is driven by its economic interdependence with Iran and the security threat from Iran and other GCC states following the 2017 boycott.

Security

Historically Qatar has not witnessed major conflicts with Iran that undermined its security and stability following the Islamic revolution. Qatar's domestic politics plays a major role in shaping the nature of its relations with its GCC neighbours and with Iran. The 1995 coup in which the Emir was overthrown and replaced by his son Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, started a new era for Qatari politics, paving it away from Saudi dominance and towards more independent policies that reflect on its foreign policy (Khatib 2013). It's strife for independence away from the GCC rules led Qatar into a different path where it was accused of providing support for Islamist groups across the Arab world including groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar also started showing more leniency towards Iran during the past few decades when it rejected to vote against a United Nations resolution to halt Iran's nuclear enrichment programme in 2006 and signing of a counterterrorism agreement with Iran (Gordon,

Yadlin and Heistein 2017). Security and economic interest are both factors that explain Qatar's hedging with Iran. The nation is considered weaker than Iran on the military level, while setting aside the presence of the US fifth fleet in the Gulf waters.

Qatar has taken a mediatory role in the region with several conflicts that include maintaining good relations with Iran and Iran backed militias in the region such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. It realises Iran's expansionist agenda and the security threat it poses; therefore, its policy of hedging is in line with its self-interest (Khatib 2013). In addition, Qatar also considers the pressure from Saudi Arabia and the necessity to build alliances in case of security threats from within the Gulf.

Qatar's relations with Iran witnessed a brief period of balancing from 2015 to 2017 as it joined the GCC forces to fight the Houthis in Yemen. Iran also perceived Qatar as a threat due to its support for Sunni Syrian rebel group Al Nusra Front fighting the Iran supported Assad regime (Gordon, Yadlin and Heistein 2017).

Qatar's policy of hedging towards Iran was strengthened with time due to internal conflicts within the GCC . It's policy shifted to hedging following the 2017 boycott when Saudi Arabia expelled Qatar from the Saudi led coalition in Yemen fighting the Iran supported Houthi rebels. Qatar continues to hedge with Iran despite an end to the quartet's (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt) boycott in January 2021. The demands set forward were not officially met or resolved. Recent official visits by Iranian President Ibrahim Raeesi to the Qatari Capital Doha and Qatar's Emir's official visit to Tehran in May 2022 to mediate US Iran nuclear talks are among the ongoing positive relations between the two countries.

Qatar strengthens its hedging while it realizes that it needs to keep its options open due to an uncertain climate in the Gulf, where another boycott could be possible (Zaccara 2019). Qatar

is surrounded by the Gulf states and its persistence to continue an independent foreign policy that is not in line with its neighbors leaves it at risk of further action from Saudi Arabia, considering that Qatar hardly made any concessions following the demands of the boycotting states (Zaccara 2019).

Religion

Unlike some of the other GCC countries Qatar does not have a significant Shia population. The absence of a Shia political dynamic in Qatar is possibly one of the reasons behind the disinterest of the Islamic regime in Qatar's internal affairs. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran had no direct impact on Qatar's domestic politics. Therefore, religion is not as influential as security and economy in shaping Qatar's policy towards Iran.

Economy

Qatar protects its economic interests as it shares the world's largest gas field with Iran (Gordon, Yadlin and Heistein 2017). In recent years Qatar's policies started to go more in a different direction than that of Saudi Arabia's and the rest of the GCC. Hence, following several failed attempts by the member states to align their policies and bring Qatar closer, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in addition to Egypt (a non GCC member) decided to boycott Qatar in 2017 (Zaccara 2019). The boycott included cutting all diplomatic and trade ties, closing down all borders including a ban on Qatar's national carrier Qatar Airways on entering the air space of any of the countries. This was an attempt to coerce Qatar into changing its policies. The boycotting states who view Qatar as a sponsor of terrorist groups issued a set of thirteen demands that included scaling down on ties with Iran and all Islamist groups and militias such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah. Qatar denied these claims. The boycotting states also demanded cutting diplomatic ties and ending military and intelligence cooperation with Iran.

In addition, they demanded that trade relations with Iran should comply with imposed US sanctions that do not not jeopardise the security of the Gulf states (Zaccara 2019). The boycott led Qatar to further strengthening its ties with Iran as later in the same year it reinstated its Ambassador to Tehran, while it had previously recalled its Ambassador in solidarity with Saudi Arabia following the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in 2016. Iran provided its airspace to Qatar's national carrier Qatar Airways in a show of good faith, it also sent shipments of food to Doha, hence paving the way for a culture of acceptance among the Qatari population who were isolated by their Gulf neighbours (Zaccara 2019). Qatar also signed a transportation agreement with Iran and Turkey following the boycott to enhance its trade ties with the two countries (Zaccara 2019).

Qatar's hedging policy is shaped by security and economy. It prioritizes its economic interests and hedges between Saudi Arabia and Iran while realizing the hegemonic aspirations of both nations.

State of Kuwait

Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy ruled by the Sunni Al Sabah tribe. It has a population of 3 million that comprises of an estimated 70% Sunni and 30% Shia and expatriates comprising around 70% of the population. Kuwait shares borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia and has the world's sixth largest oil reserves. It is considered to have one of the most independent legislative bodies in the region (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016).

Kuwait is a hedger as it is not involved in any military confrontation or proxy war with Iran. In addition, Kuwait has a significant Shia population that has strong ties with the ruling Al Sabah family, making the religious aspect of influence on policy choices with Iran. It also maintains diplomatic relations with Iran.

Kuwait shows consistency with the security hypothesis, being a vulnerable state that hedges. It is the most inconsistent case with the hypothesis as it shows inconsistency with the other two factors; religion and economy. Kuwait is a puzzling case as it hedges while having a significant Shia population, reflecting that the Shia population poses a form of threat to regime stability, however interaction with Iran is not being contained. Kuwait does not have structural economic interdependence with Iran, yet it chooses to build trade relations with Iran. Kuwait views Iran as both an internal and external threat and its hedging is shaped by all three factors.

Security

The security situation of the Gulf region started changing as the Iran-Iraq erupted in 1980 soon after the Islamic revolution, tensions between Iran and Kuwait escalated as Kuwait supported Iraq (Rubin 2013). During the course of the war, Iran repeatedly attacked Kuwait's oil refinery (Mumtaz 2005). All the Gulf states supported Iraq at the initial stages of the war on Iran to counterbalance Ayatollah Khomeini's influence in the region. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain remained to be strong supporters of Iraq through the course of the eight-year war out of the fear of the Islamic revolution's expansionist agenda, while the other Gulf states moved towards neutrality (Mumtaz 2005).

The Iranian regime continued to intervene in Kuwait's internal affairs and security. In 2010, Kuwait unveiled a spy and terror cell linked to Iran's Islamic Republican Guard Corps in addition to terror plots against Kuwait International Airport. Iran refuted these claims and a Commander of the Islamic Republican Guard Corps responded by stating that the entire Kuwait army is even smaller than one division of the IRGC and a spy cell is not required. Kuwait in turn responded by becoming the first country to designate the Iran supported Hezbollah group as a

terrorist organisation (Rubin 2010). In 2011 Kuwait also expelled Iranian diplomats upon allegations of espionage (Windecker and Sendrowickz 2015).

In 2015, Kuwait joined the Saudi led coalition fighting the Iran supported Houthi rebels in Yemen, as part of Kuwait's efforts to counter any threat to regional security. However, Kuwait's military role in Yemen narrowed down with time as it took a more reconciliatory role in the conflict by holding talks between the different sides. Its unofficial withdrawal from the Yemen war strengthens its hedging towards Iran. Kuwait continues to have diplomatic relations with Iran despite a decision by Saudi Arabia to cut diplomatic ties following an attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in 2016, which Bahrain and even Qatar followed at the time.

Kuwait's relations with Iran remain to be tense. Hedging towards Iran is evident as Kuwait's policy has grown less confrontational by withdrawing from the Yemen war and choosing to maintain diplomatic relations with several official visits between the two countries. Kuwait perceives Iran as both an internal and external threat but chooses the path of hedging.

Religion

More than quarter of the Kuwaiti population are Shia Muslims some of whom originate from Iran (Rubin 2013). The historic relations of the Shia community in Kuwait are strong with the state and the ruling family. Elements of the Shia community fought alongside the Al Sabah ruling family to consolidate their rule against other tribes in the early decades of the twentieth century hence forming a strong alliance and making the dynamic of relations with Iran different than countries like Bahrain. Kuwait was the first Gulf country to gain independence from British rule in 1961, following that it established a parliament. Kuwaiti politics witnessed activity from different movements including the leftists, the Baath party, Sunni and Shia Islamists (Rubin 2013).

The Kuwaiti parliament provided equal rights of voting to citizens; however, the Shia population was not proportionally represented in the earlier phases of the parliament in the 1960s. The state ensured inclusiveness by appointing Shia figures into ministerial posts (Rubin 2013). One of the first threats by the Islamic revolution towards Kuwait were made months after the revolution when Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme leader of the revolution stressed on exporting the revolution to Kuwait, dismissed Kuwait's sovereignty and called for a transnational Islamic government and warned Kuwait against harbouring the opponents of Islam (Rubin 2013). This in turn affected the internal relations of the state with the Shia community as Shia figures were removed from their earlier appointed executive posts.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to Kuwait mending the relations between the state and the Shia population who defended their land against Iraq's invading forces. This also created a new era for national unity among Sunnis and Shias in Kuwait who stood united after liberation in February 1991. The state allowed the formation of Shia groups and publications, paving the way for the return and victory of Shia figures in the 1992 parliamentary elections. The relations with the Shia community are reflective of the relations with Iran, the sole representative of Shia Muslims in the region and the world. Kuwait's relations with Iran turned to hedging following its liberation from Saddam Hussein's invasion, however its relations with Iran remained to be unstable. The relations between the state and Kuwait's Shia community plays a vital role in shaping the policy of the state as described above. While good relations were evident domestically with the Shia population, good relations were evident with the Islamic Republic and when relations were tense with either the Iranian regime or the Shia community it reflected on the policy of the state towards both. Hence, relations shaped by religion are an important factor in Kuwait's policies towards Iran.

Economy

There is no structural economic interdependence between Iran and Kuwait, however the two countries are bound by strong economic ties such as Iran's access to a free zone in Kuwait City, making the two countries major trading partners (Pfeifer 2002).

Kuwait is a case where all three factors security, religion and economy play a role in shaping its policy towards Iran. Kuwait is the most vulnerable due to its geographic location and shared borders with Iraq. Considering Iran's influence on Iraqi politics, Kuwait chooses to hedge in order to avoid conflicts with both Iraq and Iran and any spillover effects of Iraq's sectarian conflict into Kuwait's borders.

The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates is a federal government of seven emirates formed in 1971 following independence from British rule. It has an estimated population of 9.9 million of which around 90% are expatriates. The UAE does not have a significant Shia demographic. It is considered to be a model of stability and good governance in the Middle East region. The UAE is also among the world's top ten largest oil producers. The UAE's military is considered to be the most capable and best trained forces of the Gulf (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016).

The UAE is considered a balancer due to its involvement in a military confrontation with Iran in Yemen. However, it continues to have diplomatic and trade relations with Iran.

The UAE shows consistency with the security factor, however this case remains to be unclear considering its advanced military capabilities, yet small geographic size in comparison to Iran. There is no consistency with the religion factor as the UAE has no significant Shia population. It also shows consistency with the economy factor as it has no structural economic interdependence with Iran. The UAE's balancing towards Iran is driven by the security factor as

it considers Iran as an external security threat. It is also influenced by the UAE's standing within the GCC's and its alliance with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain against Iran's threats to their domestic stability.

Security

The UAE considers Iran to be the greatest threat to its security (Rugh 1996). It has a history of tense relations with Iran that includes a conflict over a number of islands; Abu Mussa, Greater and Lesser Tumbs (Bianco 2020). The UAE has expressed its discontent for Iran's nuclear programme (Windecker and Sendrowickz 2015). A series of missile and drone attacks on UAE and Saudi energy targets by Yemen's Houthi rebels took place in 2019 (Ulrichsen 2021). It was also victim to drone strikes by the Houthis in January 2022. The UAE confronts Iran in the Yemen war; however, the two countries continue to have diplomatic relations. The UAE condemned the attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in 2016, nevertheless it did not cut its diplomatic ties with Iran. Iran's increased support for militant groups all across the region including Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and most recently Yemen reflects a reality that the threat is getting closer to the UAE's borders. During the past few months, the Houthi rebels in Yemen have escalated their attacks on both the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia by targeting the economic infrastructure of the two states.

Religion

The United Arab Emirates does not have a significant Shia demographic. The absence of a Shia demographic eliminates religious threat associated with sectarian tension that can be witnessed in countries like Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Iran does not present an internal threat to the UAE.

Economy

Being a federal government, the different emirates show relatively different policies as the emirate of Dubai enjoys stronger trade relations with Iran than the capital Abu Dhabi and reflects more lenient policies towards Iran (Bianco 2020). Abu Dhabi's approach is more centred around security while Dubai's is centred around trade (Ulrichsen 2021). There is no structural economic interdependence between the two countries, however the emirate of Dubai is considered to be Iran's main re-export hub at the time of international sanctions (Ulrichsen 2021). The UAE bases its policy on security and economic aspects as it views economic opportunities with Iran while considering the security threats (Davidson 2009).

The UAE's balancing is shaped by security. Religion does not play a role in shaping policy towards Iran. While the different emirates show different levels of trade relations with Iran, the capital Abu Dhabi, the decisionmaker for the federal government shapes the policy of the state and bases that policy mainly on security.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the largest of the Gulf states with a population of 34.8 million comprising of 85-90% Sunni Muslims and about 10-15% Shia. It is an absolute monarchy ruled by the Al Saud Sunni tribe and is considered of great importance to the global economy as it is the second largest oil producer following the United States. Saudi Arabia holds 16% of the world's total oil reserves and is considered a leader of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries). Saudi plays a key role in global counter terrorism efforts and is considered the top importer of US arms exports in the world and the major and largest military power in the Gulf (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016).

Saudi Arabia is considered a balancer as it leads a proxy war against the Iran supported Houthi rebels in Yemen. It has no diplomatic relations or any form of economic interdependence

with Iran. The struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran over regional hegemony makes Saudi Arabia a balancer.

Saudi Arabia shows consistency with the security hypothesis as it is not a vulnerable state. Saudi Arabia does not have a significantly large Shia population; however the findings are considered to be consistent with the religion hypothesis as Saudi Arabia considers religion as a threat in influencing sectarian tensions. It is consistent with the economy factor as it has no structural economic interdependence with Iran.

Saudi Arabia's policy towards Iran is driven by security and religion. Iran is considered as both an internal and external threat to Saudi Arabia. The sectarian divide in the region is led by Saudi Arabia and Iran's religious schools of thought, therefore religion plays an important role in shaping Saudi policy towards Iran.

Security

In the 1980s Iran showed support for Shia militia organisations inside Saudi Arabia such as Hezbollah Al Hijaz with the aim of expanding its reach (Mathiessen 2010). Saudi Arabia recalled its Ambassador from Iran on several occasions since 1979 as an objection to Iran's aggressive policies towards the Gulf states. Saudi's policies towards Iran were less confrontational in the period from 1989 -2005 during the presidencies of Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami who aimed at mending relations with the Gulf states. In later years Iran followed more aggressive policies towards the Gulf states (Windecker and Sendrowickz 2015). Iran targeted Saudi diplomats repeatedly and undermined its security. Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran escalated following the 2011 Arab Spring when Saudi Arabia viewed Iranian intervention in Bahrain's affairs as an intervention in the domestic affairs of the GCC member states, a matter that Saudi considered a red line that was not to be crossed (Ighani 2016). Saudi-

Iran relations escalated following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in 2016 and a decision by Saudi Arabia to cut diplomatic ties with Iran. The Saudi policy towards Iran turned into balancing also when Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's alliance with Iran grew stronger towards crushing the Sunni protest movement in Syria. In 2013, Saudi Arabia armed Syrian Sunni rebel groups in retaliation of the Shia militias supported by Al Assad and Iran, hence taking its policy of confrontation to a proxy war. This proxy war was followed by the Yemen war in 2015, where the Saudi led coalition support the elected government in Yemen against the Iran supported Houthi rebels (Ighani 2016). The Saudi led coalition in Yemen currently includes the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia is showing no tolerance towards Iran's aggression in the region and is willingly fighting the proxy war in Yemen with the aim of destroying the Houthis (Ighani 2016).

Iran's support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen is considered a major threat to Saudi's security as Saudi shares borders with Yemen and would not allow a Shia state sponsored by Iran at its back door. Iran's threat to Saudi Arabia's security has taken different shapes and forms in the past few decades and the proxy wars are direct confrontation. The past few years have witnessed several drone attacks on both Saudi and UAE infrastructure projects by the Houthi rebels, including an attack on the gas pipelines of the Saudi oil company Aramco (Bianco 2020). Saudi Arabia's policy of balancing will possibly only shift if an agreement is reached regarding Yemen. The struggle for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran presents many challenges for the region.

Iran's support for Shia militia groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis and the expanding activities of the Islamic Republican Guard that was listed as a terrorist organisation by some countries creates an ongoing security threat to the Gulf countries spearheaded by Saudi

Arabia (Ighani 2016). Iran is considered a threat to the security of Saudi Arabia since the Islamic revolution and remains to be so.

Religion

Saudi-Iran relations worsened since the early days of the Islamic revolution when Iran began to contend Saudi Arabia for leading the Islamic world (Matthiesen 2010). Soon after Iranian pilgrims in Mecca clashed with Saudi police while they were protesting, leading to the death of more than four hundred Iranian protesters and Saudi policemen and further tensions between the two nations (Mumtaz 2005).

Saudi Arabia's Shia community are a minority that is neither strongly represented in the legislative authority such as Kuwait and Bahrain, nor is it highly influential in the political landscape of the country (al-Rasheed 1998).

Saudi authorities in 2016 executed leading Shia opposition cleric Nimr Al Nimr, a move that disturbed the Iranian regime (Ighani 2016). The religious rivalry between the Saudi Sunni; Wahabi and Salafi school of Islam on one side and Shia Iran on the other has historic roots (Sajedi 1993). During the past five years, Saudi Arabia has started a series of reforms under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) that paved Saudi society away from Wahhabism and strict Islamic practices, hence reflecting more tolerant values and practices. Social reforms in Saudi Arabia can possibly have prospects for easing the sectarian tension in the wider region. The Saudi government has also put efforts in including Shia citizens in the executive and legislative authority by appointing Shia ministers and members in the Consultative council (Seznec 2015).

Economy

Saudi Arabia has no economic interdependence with Iran. Iran decided to cut all trade relations with Saudi Arabia following Saudi's decision to cut diplomatic ties in 2016. However, the level of trade of between the two countries was considered to be insignificant. Saudi Arabia and Iran are considered to be competitors in the global oil market (Ighani 2016).

The struggle for hegemonic power between Saudi Arabia and Iran is shaped by security and religion, hence this influences Saudi Arabia's policy towards Iran. Saudi Arabia also play a vital role in the policies of other GCC states towards Iran, being the strongest and most influential among the six member states. Saudi Arabia's policy is shaped by security and religion.

Sultanate of Oman - The Continuous Hedger

Oman is the second largest country in the Gulf after Saudi Arabia. It is an absolute monarchy. Oman's location opposite Iran is considered of strategic importance due to the Strait of Hormuz, to which Iran and Oman share sovereignty. It has an estimated population of 3.7 million. Oman is the largest oil and natural gas producer that is a non OPEC member. It has considered to have effective military forces. Oman's policy within and outside the Gulf Cooperation Council leans towards peace building and diplomacy. It has for long preserved a strategy of of nonalignment (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016).

Oman is a considered a hedger as it has always maintained strong relations with Iran. There is no evidence of any forms of confrontation with the Iranian regime since the Islamic revolution. The shared sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz creates a structural economic interdependence between Oman and Iran. Religion is not a threat to Oman's domestic politics due to the absence of the Sunni-Shia dynamic.

The case of Oman shows consistency with the economy and religion hypothesis . It is inconsistent with the security hypotheses. Oman's hedging is driven by security and economy due to the presence of structural economic interdependence and geographic proximity to Iran.

Security

Oman has not faced any major security threats from Iran. The relations between the two countries have been peaceful since the Islamic revolution. Oman maintains shared sovereignty over the strait of Hormuz with Iran since the reign of the Shah and regime change in Iran following the revolution did not create any major disputes over this issue (Windecker and Sendrowicks 2015). Oman has taken a mediatory role in the region towards Iran and others hence creating a balance between other gulf states and Iran (Friedman 2012). It took a leading role in mediatory talks during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and during the Iran nuclear deal in 2014 (Windecker and Sendrowicks 2015).

Religion

The religious demographic of Oman is different than other Gulf states as the majority of the population are Muslim Ibadhis, a sect different than Sunni and Shia Islam (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016). There is no significant Shia demographic to be influenced by Iran. Therefore, Iran does not pose an internal religious threat to Oman in a way that can influence its policy choices.

Economy

Oman and Iran maintain strong economic ties as Iran serves as Oman's main gas supplier (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016). There is structural economic interdependence between the two countries as they share sovereignty over the strait of Hormuz which is considered the gateway to the Gulf's oil (Talmadge 2008). Therefore, shared sovereignty over the strait of

Hormuz and Iran being Oman's main gas supplier presents a case of structural economic interdependence where economic ties are solid, unchangeable and beneficial to both countries.

Oman chooses to continuously hedge as it realizes the threat posed by Iran. It also has no reason to balance against Iran as there is no evident conflict between the two states and Iran does not pose any direct internal threat due to their friendly relations and the absence of a significant Shia population in Oman. Security and economy shape Oman's hedging towards Iran.

Kingdom of Bahrain

The island Kingdom of Bahrain is the smallest Gulf nation. It lies to the east of Saudi Arabia, opposite Iran. Its relations with Iran have historic roots due to the Persian conquests in the Gulf region. It is a constitutional monarchy ruled by the Al Khalifa Sunni tribe with an estimated population of 1.5 million out of which 52% are expatriates. Bahrain does not provide official statistics on its population based on sect however according to many NGOs it has a significantly large Shia population that represents an estimated 50% of the population. Bahrain was a British protectorate and gained its independence in August 1971.

Bahrain's balancing behaviour is reflected in its confrontation with Iran in the proxy war with the Houthi rebels in Yemen, as it is a part of the Saudi led coalition. The lack of diplomatic and economic ties between Bahrain and Iran is also an indicator of balancing. In addition, the religious relations with the Shia community are problematic as elements of the Shia community belong to the political opposition. The presence of Shia militia groups supported by the Iran Republican Guard Corps are all factors that shaped the policy choices of Bahrain leading it to balance rather than hedge with Iran since 2011.

The case of Bahrain shows inconsistency with the security hypothesis. It is a vulnerable state that does not hedge and chooses confrontation. However, it is consistent with the religion

and economy hypotheses. Bahrain has a significantly large Shia population while it has no structural economic interdependence with Iran.

Bahrain's policy is shaped by security and religion. Bahrain considers Iran as both an internal and an external security threat.

Security

Prior to Bahrain's independence there were claims by the Shah of Iran over the sovereignty of Bahrain. These claims and the dispute over Bahrain were peacefully settled following a United Nations referendum where the people of Bahrain voted for the Al Khalifa rule (Mumtaz 2005). Bahrain and Iran witnessed a period of peaceful bilateral relations during the Shah's reign until his overthrow and the rise of the Islamic republic in 1979. The Islamic revolution is a decisive factor in the relations of Iran with its neighbours across the region including Bahrain. The revolution affected both the religious and security dynamics of the Gulf as a whole. The Shia movement undermining the security of Bahrain with Iranian support extended to creating a divide between the Shia community and the monarchy in the 1980s and 1990s that was a result of protests, arrests and episodes of violence and several coup attempts. The first coup attempt of 1981 was led by Shia cleric and representative of Ayatollah Khomeini in Bahrain, Hadi alMudarissi who had established the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (Friedman 2012). The second coup attempt was in 1994 and the third was in 2011. Some of Shia Islamist political opposition organisations leading the anti-establishment movement were supported by Iran. In addition, these organisations followed a political religious ideology in line with the Iranian Valiye Faqeeh (the Supreme Leader) ideology that came to rise following Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution (Khatam 2009). Therefore, religion, politics and security became intermixed in the domestic politics of Bahrain with an Iranian influence affecting

Bahrain's relations with Iran following the revolution and hence Iran became an internal threat to Bahrain. However, despite the periods of tension and Iran's intervention in Bahrain's domestic affairs, the island kingdom chose a policy of hedging with Iran as it maintained diplomatic relations through the period following the revolution until the Yemen war.

Iran's sponsoring of coup attempts, terror plots and violent protests affected the relations in a way that shaped animosity between both countries. In addition, Saudi Arabia's patronage of Bahrain and the Gulf Cooperation Council's formation in 1981 as a unified move against Iranian aggression also strengthened this stance for the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf.

Bahrain continued a hedging policy with Iran with diplomatic ties and official visits including an official visit by Bahrain's King to Iran in 2002 and Iranian President Khatami's visit to Bahrain in 2003 (Mumtaz 2005).

In 2011, Iran became a greater security threat to Bahrain as violence erupted during the events of the Arab Spring. The 2011 political unrest in Bahrain witnessed a series of events that led to a sectarian divide and Iran's support for the Shia opposition and militia groups. The events reflected a security threat posed by Iran on the domestic stability of Bahrain (Ighani 2016). In March 2011, the GCC joint military forces (the Peninsula Shield) were requested to enter Bahrain with the aim of protecting Bahrain's strongholds and infrastructure from any attacks (Friedman 2012). This move was a direct message from the Gulf Cooperation Council led by Saudi Arabia towards Iran to stop meddling in the affairs of Bahrain, following statements by the Supreme leader Ali Khamenei expressing support to the protest movement. In the months and years that followed the February-March 2011 unrest, Bahrain impounded several bomb shipments and uncovered explosive warehouses that belonged to Shia militias. It also found evidence of militant groups such as Al Ashtar Brigades that were trained by the Islamic

Republican Guard Corps and Hezbollah (Bianco 2020). The Bahraini authorities impounded several shipments of weapons that had arrived from Iran. Official statements also increased tensions between the two countries, such as a statement by Iran's Parliament speaker Ali Nateq Nouri who claimed that Bahrain is the fourteenth province of Iran (Alhasan 2011). In 2016 Bahrain expelled the Iranian Ambassador and recalled its Ambassador to Iran, cutting all diplomatic ties with the Islamic republic and also banning all daily flights between the two countries. This decision was made following a similar decision by Saudi Arabia in response to an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Bahrain also joined the Saudi led coalition in Yemen in 2015 to fight the Iran supported Houthi rebels who were fighting the Yemeni government. Hence, Bahrain's gradual move from hedging to balancing towards Iran started in 2011.

The events that undermined the security of Bahrain, leading to a sectarian divide, terror plots and incidents are the key reasons behind Bahrain's recent policy of balancing towards Iran (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016). Since cutting diplomatic ties in 2016, Bahrain and Iran have witnessed no formal relations. Bahrain's balancing policy reflects no tolerance towards Iran's aggression that has been lasting for more than four decades. According to the balance of threat theory, being the smallest state, it would be expected for Bahrain to continue hedging with Iran. Considering that Iran is more powerful and holds a greater religious and political dominance in the region, its security threat should put Bahrain in a weaker position, however Bahrain's confrontation is puzzling.

Religion

Regime change in Iran magnified the Shia political activity in Bahrain that affected both the security and overall regime stability of the state. In 1981 the formation of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a Shia Islamist organisation funded by Iran attempted a coup in

Bahrain (Mumtaz 2005). Elements of the Shia community in Bahrain find Iran as the patron of their faith and political ideology following 1979 and this certainly affects the dynamics of Bahrain's policies towards Iran. Therefore, during the period of 1980s and 1990s a policy of hedging was both to maintain a balanced relationship with a rising Shia population inside the country that was growing fonder of Iran and less fond of the regime which it deemed as repressive; and a rising regional power with an expansionist vision that had a significant number of supporters for its agenda in Bahrain more than any other country in the region.

Domestically, Bahrain mended its relations with the Shia population following the 2001 constitutional referendum, the National Action Charter. Following the referendum, Bahrain witnessed drastic political changes including a pardon of all political detainees most of whom were Shia, a return of all exiled activists and parliamentary elections in addition to the establishment of opposition organisations spearheaded by Shia Islamist Al Wefaq Islamic Society.

Political groups such as Al Wefaq worked along Shia Islamist agendas that played a role in sectarian tensions during the 2011 unrest. Bahrain also revoked the citizenship of top Shia cleric and Spiritual leader of the Shia political opposition Ayatollah Isa Qassim in 2016 upon allegations of money laundering and building networks with a foreign power. Ayatollah Qassim was one of the main supporters of the 2011 protest movement. The decision was condemned by Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran's Parliament Speaker, and Commander of the IRGC Qassim Soleimani.

Bahrain provides equal rights to freedom of religious practice to all citizens including its Shia citizens. The Shia religious holiday of Ashura is a public holiday in Bahrain. However, the support shown from Iran for the religious political opposition through official statements was

alarming to Bahrain. Religion is a decisive factor in shaping Bahrain's policy, considering the loyalty of certain segments of the Shia population towards Iran.

Economy

Bahrain does not base its policy choices with Iran on economic interests. The economic ties linking Bahrain and Iran were affected by the security and religious factors that caused a rift between the two countries. Bahrain has no structural economic interdependence with Iran as the two countries do not share any gas or oil fields. Plans to supply Bahrain with Iran's gas in 2008 were later halted following the 2011 unrest and Iran's involvement in Bahrain's domestic affairs. In recent years Bahrain was estimated to conduct less than 1% of its total trade with Iran (Nuruzzamann 2013). Economy does not highly affect Bahrain's policy towards Iran, as there are currently no significant economic benefits that outweigh the security and religious threat which Iran poses to Bahrain.

Religion and security are linked in the case of Bahrain. They are the two decisive factors in shaping Bahrain's balancing policy. Iran's hostility towards Bahrain and evident intentions for regime instability and continuous support for Shia terror groups in Bahrain has created many obstacles for hedging. Therefore, leading Bahrain, the smallest country in the region to confrontation and balancing.

Findings

The Gulf states base their policies towards Iran on religion, security and economy. Security is a common factor based on which all states shape their policies. Religion alongside other factors shapes the policy of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait. Economy alongside other factors influences the policy of Qatar, Oman and Kuwait. The states base their policy on a combination of factors, none of the states shape their policy solely on one of the explanatory factors. The diverse responses and

attitudes of the six states reflects the different nature of threat posed by Iran on these nations. While some perceive it mostly as an internal threat, others perceive only it as an external threat and some others view it as a neighbor and prefer to remain nonaligned, while prioritizing their economic interests. Iran has been successful in preventing the Gulf nations from taking a unified stance against it by taking a diverse approach towards each nation individually rather than collectively.

Balancing is not the norm with smaller weaker states and Bahrain strengthens its balancing position through its membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council and the solid support of the much larger states of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Both religion and security are the key factors in shaping Bahrain's policy. Religion and Security are also interlinked in many ways that affect Bahrain's policy towards Iran, considering the threats posed by Shia militias and political groups supported by the Iranian regime. The absence of economic interdependence with Iran makes religion and security the decisive factors in shaping Bahrain's policy. Bahrain has a significantly large Shia population and hence balances to avoid further influence by Iran on its Shia population. Bahrain gradually shifted its policy from hedging to balancing following the 2011 domestic political unrest where evidence showed Iran's support for militant opposition elements inside its territories (Cordesman, Markusen and Jones 2016). Bahrain and Saudi Arabia showed a hedging policy previously by maintaining diplomatic ties with Iran, however the 2015 war in Yemen and a decision in 2016 to cut diplomatic ties with the Islamic republic shows a shift in policy.

The difference between the three balancer states lies in their perception of the threat posed by Iran. Therefore, despite the alignment of policy through balancing, certain differences are evident in dealing with Iran. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain view Iran mostly as an internal threat due to its influence on their Shia population, however it remains as an external threat to both

nations. The United Arab Emirates views Iran as an external threat and bases its policy on security, while Saudi Arabia views it as both an internal and external threat and bases its balancing towards Iran on security and religion. The UAE presents a slightly different attitude than the other two balancers. It has not cut diplomatic ties with Iran, yet its policy of confrontation is reflected in joining the Saudi led coalition in Yemen that fights the Iran supported Houthi rebels.

Qatar does not have a significant Shia population; hence the rise of the Islamic republic did not pose a massive internal threat and regime instability, however Iran remains to be a security threat as it is a neighboring hegemonic power. Qatar's hedging towards Iran is also described by perceiving its own Gulf neighbors as a security threat following the boycott. Qatar has shown more positive attitudes towards Iran especially following the 2017 boycott imposed by its fellow GCC neighbours (Zaccara 2019). Qatar reflects continuous hedging between Saudi and Iran by take a leading role as a mediatory regional power while it keeps its economic ambitions and interest at the forefront, considering that Qatar is at the center of the world's attention as the host of the 2022 World Cup. Economic interest and security continue to lead Qatar towards a direction of hedging.

Both Kuwait and Qatar continue to hedge between Saudi Arabia and Iran while realising the threats posed by Iran on the long run. Kuwait is the most vulnerable due to its geographic location. Its shared borders with Iraq make it more vulnerable on the security level than the other Gulf states.

The internal social and political dynamics of the smaller states of the Gulf; Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait are decisive of the level to which religion and security influence their foreign policy. Economy plays an important role in shaping the policy of the hedgers due to Iran's geographic

proximity; however, Bahrain shares similar geographic proximity to Iran and is more influenced by security and religion than economy.

Oman's nonalignment is also perceived as a security-based policy. In addition, the level of security threat results in different policies. To the smaller states Bahrain and Kuwait, Iran poses an internal religious and security threat, however the responses vary due to the religious relations and demographic. Bahrain's larger Shia population which is a bigger internal threat leads to balancing and Kuwait's smaller Shia population which is therefore more controllable and is a smaller threat leads to hedging towards Iran.

Majority of the states have changed their positions. The smaller Gulf states show opposite policy choices. My case studies show that with the exception of Oman all the other Gulf countries show no consistency in their policies towards Iran across time. Bahrain shows a policy of balancing based on security and religious factors. On the other hand, Qatar bases its policy on economic interest and security.

Oman continues to choose a hedging policy. Although the reasons may vary but Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar have shifted their position between balancing and hedging across time. Qatar was a balancer as it was part of the Saudi led coalition in Yemen from 2015 to 2017. Kuwait was also a balancer until it unofficially withdrew from the Yemen war. Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia were all considered hedgers until the escalation of events following the Arab Spring and Saudi leading the coalition to fight the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The policies of the six states towards Iran have shifted with time based on the three factors that drive them. All factors that shape the policies are fluid and can also be influenced by geopolitical aspects. External threats such as Iran's nuclear deal play a role in the Gulf-Iran

relations. Current talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the Biden administration's official stance on including the Gulf states in any talks on a nuclear agreement with Iran is evidence that the political climate and challenges being faced can create another shift in the attitudes of these countries towards Iran. Peace is not far-fetched, and all six states and Iran can either be drawn further apart or closer to each other following a return to the Iranian nuclear deal. The war in Yemen and Syria is another issue that creates shifts in the GCC policies. Changes in the leaderships of these states and Iran have previously changed their attitudes, hence any future change can once again lead to further hedging or balancing. During the presidency of the reformist president Khatami, Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and all other Gulf countries were less confrontational, with no proxy wars, strong bilateral relations (Gaub 2016). The relations took a different turn with later changes in the Iranian presidency under President Ahmadinejad and the rise of security challenges that affected the whole region.

The attitudes towards Iran will not remain stagnant, however some of these states will continue to shape their foreign policies based on their national interests rather than choosing a unified GCC foreign policy. My assumption is that the different approaches of the six states will remain unchanged until both regional hegemons Saudi Arabia and Iran reach an agreement with regard to three security related issues, the war in Yemen, Iran's support for militia groups across the region and Iran's involvement in the Syrian war. An agreement on the security issues can ease tensions between Iran and the balancers and will possibly draw them towards a policy of hedging that can start by strengthening diplomatic relations.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic remains to be a major threat to all Gulf countries despite the level of hedging chosen by some states (Mumtaz 2005). The ideological and religious differences and Iran's aspirations for regional hegemony and exportation of the revolution to the region and the Islamic world will continue to present challenges for the Gulf states (Guzansky 2014). The different policies towards Iran reflect the failure of the Gulf Cooperation Council in moving towards the unification of foreign policy among all six member states on all fronts.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has failed in recent years to unify its foreign policy and meet some of the outcomes it was initially established for. A failed unified stance weakens the GCC and strengthens Iran's aggression towards its neighbours. Religion, security and economy remain to be key factors based on which the different states choose their policy.

This research is an attempt to describe the shift in policy choices of the Gulf states, despite a general realization by the Gulf states that Iran presents an ongoing security threat. The balancers are making their choices based on security and religious challenges and the hedgers are divided between basing their policies on economic interests, security and religion however as challenges grow and if the relations of the balancers deteriorate with Iran, this could possibly lead some of the hedgers to return to a unified stance and side with the balancers.

The Gulf Cooperation Council member states should unitedly work on confidence building measures and efforts to engage positively with Iran on areas of peace building and ending the security conflict. Hedger states should do more in the direction of bridging the gap

between the balancers and Iran by working towards measures that enhance the collective security of the whole region. Iran is facing another economic crisis that could lead it in the direction of enhancing its relations with the Gulf including the balancer states. These choices can be similar to the ones made in the 1990s when Iran's reformist presidents built stronger relations with the Gulf states. Hence, there are prospects for peace building with Iran, where the hedgers can play a bigger role. Future research can consider other factors such as the military presence of the United States in the Gulf that strengthens the position of smaller states such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. In addition, issues such as the nuclear deal can also have an impact on relations between Iran and its Gulf neighbors. The role of Saudi Arabia within the Gulf Cooperation Council and the wider region is another factor that largely influences relations between the Gulf states and Iran and can be the focus of future research on this topic.

The rise of the Sunni-Shia conflict during the past few decades presents a security challenge for the Middle East as a region and the world as a whole. It is important to address the religious security challenges that shape foreign policy and ways through which religious divides leading to interstate conflict can be avoided. There is also lack of research that addresses the behaviour of states based on religious narratives. Religion is an important factor in the governing system and the foreign policy choices of the Gulf states. Iran on the other hand is a unique case of theocratic rule, that is also listed as a state sponsor of terror by some nations. International relations literature should address the challenges faced by countries in dealing with growing ideological and security threats in such a case.

International relations literature does not strongly address the role of religion in foreign policy in a way that reflects on the situation in the Middle East. It also does not stress that states can change their foreign policy choices based on religious aspects specifically. There is a link

between religion and security that influences policy choices which should be addressed. The balance of threat theory stresses that the policies of states are based on their positions as weak or strong while it does not incorporate the importance of religious aspects exclusively (Walt 1985).

Existing literature such as the balance of threat theory describes alliance formation in the direction of balancing and bandwagoning, others address hedging extensively however there is no definitive answer to which of these policies has the best outcomes. Therefore, further research should be done to provide evidence on what are the best policy choices in dealing with a growing threatening power. My argument of religion and security being a decisive factor in the foreign policies of the members of a single treaty organisation opens the floor for further study in the area to provide field research evidence on the importance of these factors in shaping foreign policy whether in the case of the Gulf states or any other treaty organisation.

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