

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's Quest for Power in the Arab Gulf: Role of Ideational Factors and Economic Rivalry in Diverging Foreign Policy Choices

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Abstract

In a quest to emerge as the Arab Gulf's 'Top Gun', Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are striving to maintain a balance of power while simultaneously making concerted efforts at curbing Qatar's political and strategic outreach in the region. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, two major Arab powers, often depict synchronicity in their foreign policies but Saudi's reluctance to relinquish its status of dominance and the underlying quest for an influential political and economic position have turned Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, into rival allies, opting for diverging foreign policy choices in the Middle East and abroad. Pursuing a bold and unconventional foreign policy in the region, Qatar's linkages with regional militias, its close proximity to Turkey, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood are the significant drivers of its approach to regional politics. The contrasting policies of Abu Dhabi and Doha towards the Muslim Brotherhood, the role of political Islam and cross-culturalism in the Arab World have long served as the bone of contention. However, depicting a pacifist stance towards political Islam, the Saudi-Qatar rivalry is mostly strategic in nature. This paper adopts a comparative approach to understand the foreign policy choices, influencing the behavioral patterns of the three contending actors in the Gulf. Drawing upon the role of ideational factors, strategic aspirations and the role of external actors namely the U.S., Turkey, and Iran, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the persisting security dilemma and the quest for relative gains among Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha driven by the notion of security and survival in an anarchic international system.

Keywords: Arab Gulf, Foreign policy, Security dilemma, Economic rivalry, Balance of power, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Muslim Brotherhood, Political Islam.

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1. GCC and the Gulf: An Introduction

Since its formation in 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional economic and political organization comprising six monarchies, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), under the de facto headship of Saudi Arabia, has arguably materialized as one of the most potent regional cooperation organizations in the Arab world. From undertaking initiatives such as launching common economic projects, the creation of the GCC International Grid, connecting the power grids of member nations, establishing a customs union and common market, and the formation of the Joint Peninsula Shield Force, so far the organization has fostered cooperation among the six Gulf States (Babood, 2023). The Gulf countries not only have rich oil and gas reserves but also project structural homogeneity in their economic and political alignments. The political framework of the Gulf states projects an authoritarian configuration consisting of two absolute monarchies (Saudi Arabia and Oman) and three constitutional monarchies (Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain) (Hanieh, 2017).

The foundations of the GCC were laid down in 1981, largely in response to the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, in the initial phase of the onset of the Iran-Iraq war that lasted until 1988. Barry Buzan's concept of "security complex" assists well in explaining the coming of the GCC into being. The perceived threat of a revolutionary spillover from the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran seemed threatening to the security of the Sunni Arab states. At this juncture, the Gulf's threat perception of Iran evidently triumphed over the concerns of a potential hegemony of Saudi Arabia within the organization (Buzan, 2019; Ehteshami, 2011). However, in the years to come, the region witnessed a shift in Qatar's regional geopolitical perceptions, which led to its strengthening of relations with Iran alongside Kuwait and Oman, who, unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain do not perceive Iran as an existential threat to the region (Bianco, 2020).

However, political disagreements over ideational factors, assertive and independent foreign policy choices of some actors, and intensifying economic competition have long been affecting the efficacy and integrity of the GCC. The five Arab states of the GCC aspire to balance their complex relationships with a dominant Riyadh while deploying multifarious means to maintain some degree of autonomy in their foreign policy choices. Neither of the states can afford to have an overbearing Saudi Arabia, necessitating strategies of bandwagoning, hedging, and balancing among other actors in the region (Falk, 2021). Within this pretext, one hand where Qatar's independent foreign policy and its linkages with Islamist organizations in the region

have long threatened the UAE and Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions, the intensifying economic competition and the underlying quest for the potential leadership of the Gulf and the Middle East eventuated in increasingly divergent foreign policy choices by the UAE, threatening Saudi Arabia's ambitions as well as its dominant status in the Gulf.

The four-year blockade of Qatar by 'the Quartet' is over, but the efforts made at regional reconciliation proved ineffective in addressing the persisting core differences that divide Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and other GCC states. All this time, the Gulf leaders have been greeting each other warmly in official gatherings in an attempt to cloak the acrimony that has afflicted their relations over the last decade. However, these embraces fail to overshadow the changing realities driven by the competing foreign policy priorities of the Gulf countries (Jacobs, 2023). The failure to bridge the persistent gaps is exacerbating economic competition and political conflicts further afield, with ramifications for the Gulf and the Middle East.

2. Saudi Arabia vs. UAE: A Geopolitical Power Struggle

In the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, the GCC witnessed substantial economic synergy between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but this cooperation started fading away with the increasing rivalry manifesting in diverging policy approaches to regional conflicts, extensive economic competition, and an unflinching strive to exert their position and influence in the Middle East and abroad (Babood, 2023). What once seemed like a conventional rivalry between the UAE and Saudi Arabia has taken on the appearance of a rift in the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Gulf (Dunne, 2023).

Both being allies of the United States and avid importers of U.S. weapons, the two nations have maintained identical positions on Yemen since 2014, in their opposition to Iranian nuclear ambitions, its nuclear dealings with the West, and in blockading Qatar in 2017. However, the relationship between the two largest economies in the GCC has been impaired by territorial disputes, conventional dynastic politics, and the aspirational race to become a preeminent power in the Arab world (Dunne, 2023). Appearing as a threat to Saudi Arabia's ambitions and dominance in the region, the competition over potential leadership status has been the key driver of the UAE's assertive and independent foreign policy.

Political Factors

During the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and the UAE shared similar interests in opposing the soaring Islamist, revolutionary, and democratic movements across the Middle East and North Africa while simultaneously countering Iran's growing regional influence. They also perceived Iran as a threat to the Arab Gulf's conventional monarchism and Sunni regimes (Falk, 2021). In a controversial move, the GCC's Joint Peninsula Shield Force, consisting of Saudi troops and Emirati police personnel, was deployed to Bahrain in 2011, directed at crushing the anti-government protests (Babood, 2023). With the aim of restoring ousted Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi collaborated in Operation Decisive Storm in 2015. Spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, this military intervention in Yemen was carried out by a coalition of nine countries, including all the Gulf countries except Oman. The 2017 GCC's diplomatic blockade against Qatar did serve well in bringing Riyadh and Abu Dhabi closer. Both countries lobbied the US against the Iran nuclear deal (Falk, 2021).

Although both the Gulf heavyweights projected close collaboration in areas such as Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, they were not fully synchronized when it came to operationalizing the major visions they shared. For instance, in Yemen, this partnership dramatically transformed into a competitive quest for influence as the UAE attacked Yemeni governmental forces to back its southern separatist allies. Starting on similar lines, the two sides opted for diverging policies, priorities, and approaches within the Yemen-Houthi quagmire. Nurturing their power aspirations, the two sides are at odds over Yemen's intricate political underpinnings and their differing relationships with Israel and the United States. In 2018, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi started diverging over Yemen as Saudi Arabia backed the internationally recognized Hadi government while the UAE indulged in funding a network of Yemeni local proxy militias with objectives at variance with the Hadi government. Another point of disagreement was Saudi Arabia's support for Yemen's Islah movement, an Islamist umbrella group with close affiliations to the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that the UAE is very opposed to (Babood, 2023).

In July 2019, the UAE announced the "strategic redeployment" of its troops from Hodeida, Yemen, while simultaneously enhancing financial backing for its Yemeni proxies operating in the South. Bolstering the Yemeni government in its struggle against Houthis, with the Saudi-backed Hadramawt National Council standing as a counterweight to the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), both countries have nurtured aspirations to sustain a significant hold over Yemen's politics. Abu Dhabi's backing of the STC undermines the Riyadh-led

coalition's war efforts as well as the legitimacy of the Hadi government, placing Abu Dhabi and Riyadh at loggerheads. Apparently, the UAE's strategic ambitions in Yemen were not the restoration of the Hadi government but to have control over Yemen's vital strategic maritime locations, such as the building of a military facility at Socotra, a Yemeni island commanding the entrance to the Gulf of Aden (Dunne, 2023).

With the UAE formalizing its ties with Israel by signing the Abraham Accords and Saudi Arabia refusing to do so, both countries differ in their approach towards Israel, with the UAE evidently being in a profitable position (Ellenbogen 2022). In 2020, sidelining Saudi Arabia's peace proposal for recognition of Israel in return for a Palestinian state, the UAE normalized its ties with Israel. Saudi Arabia's refusal to normalize relations with Israel disadvantaged Riyadh politically and economically vis-à-vis Abu Dhabi, as relations between the two countries have grown by leaps and bounds since the signing of the Abrahamic Accords, with bilateral trade reaching \$2.5 billion in 2022 and the operation of some 1000 Israeli firms in the UAE, along with the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (Dunne, 2023).

In the case of Iran, while both remain equally distrustful of Tehran's regional aspirations, Saudi Arabia pursued a rapprochement brokered by China. Within the UAE, with Dubai having significant commercial interests and hosting a large Iranian and Iranian-origin community, there has been constant pressure from the Emirate against this all-out anti-Tehran policy (Falk, 2021). The UAE and the KSA's also have contrasting positions with regard to Doha, explaining why, by early 2021, Saudi Arabia was more inclined towards re-normalizing ties with Doha, putting behind the GCC crisis. As the UAE spearheaded the 2017 Qatari blockade, Saudi Arabia was the main agent of the al-Ula summit that culminated in lifting up the Qatari blockade (Cafiero, 2022).

Picking China to mediate the Saudi-Iran rapprochement and likewise distancing itself from Washington, King Salman has apparently opted for an independent foreign policy posture in diversifying his allies. However, forging strong economic ties with the US and being a major importer of US weaponry, US-UAE ties remain on a strong footing (Dunne, 2023). Moreover, Saudi Arabia's reluctance to renounce its dominance is affecting the cohesion of the organization, hindering integration between the organization's member states. The emerging complexities in the maintenance of regional cooperation are being marred further by the intensifying rift between Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and the

UAE's President Mohammed bin Zayed (Babood, 2023). This cutthroat rivalry is bound to intensify as both aspire to modernize and diversify their economies.

Economic Factors

Economic competitiveness is a considerable factor in analyzing the power dynamics of the GCC countries and instances of cooperation and conflict among each other. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was founded on May 25, 1981, in Abu Dhabi, UAE, resulting from a unified economic agreement aimed at bolstering regional cooperation and free trade among Gulf countries. Since their inception, the two oil-rich monarchies of the UAE and Saudi Arabia have often depicted a synergistic strategic and diplomatic pursuit for regional stability but now seem to be rival allies (Baabood, 2023). Being primarily rooted in economic competition, this incipient rivalry has exposed itself in several instances. In 2009, the UAE registered its objections to the proposition of locating the GCC central bank headquarters in Riyadh. In 2021, the UAE energy ministry deemed the Saudi-led plan within OPEC + to extend production cuts as 'unfair' as it would cost Abu Dhabi a potential loss of income.² The dispute over oil is only a fragment of the complex web of economic rivalry between the two Gulf heavyweights (Dunne, 2023).

Both Gulf countries have embarked on a transformation and diversification drive, launching initiatives to favor their respective economic goals. In the past few decades, Abu Dhabi has positioned itself as a regional hub for commerce and tourism in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, with Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 initiative introduced in 2016, has the objectives of positioning itself as the "heart of the Arab and Islamic world," turning into a "global investment powerhouse," and emerging as a global hub confluencing the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. However, despite Riyadh's announcement of initiatives such as Neom and the Red Sea project, Abu Dhabi still remains the target destination for foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Gulf region. Numerous companies looking forward to expanding in the Middle East have set up their regional headquarters in the UAE owing to its business-oriented and attractive environment with investor-friendly policies. Aiming to lower its dependency on hydrocarbons, the UAE is on a drive to establish itself as a global logistics and trade node, with Dubai's Jebel Ali port being a significant maritime trade pivot linking the

² UAE rebuffs plan by OPEC, Saudi Arabia to extend production pact (2021). Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/7/4/uae-rebuffs-plan-by-opec-allies-to-extend-production-pact>

Asian continent to Africa, pursuing a string of port strategies across the south of the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa (Baabood, 2023).

The Saudi government made its objective very clear by announcing the Project HQ initiative in early 2021, directing foreign companies to relocate their regional headquarters to its capital, Riyadh, by 2024 in order to continue its business with the kingdom. This announcement was a jolt for the UAE, where most companies are based (Jacobs, 2023). The two sides are also competing for power and influence in the Red Sea basin, with Riyadh heading an alliance of eight littoral states, excluding the UAE, aiming to improve the security apparatus and enhance economic cooperation. Conversely, the UAE has established a vital presence along the Yemeni coastline and in East African ports across the Red Sea.

3. Qatar's Quest for Regional Autonomy

Rothstein's definition of small states aptly describes the external behavior of Qatar as that of those states that do not possess the elements of physical power but play an effective and influential role by leveraging non-physical dimensions of power (Galal, 2019; Al-Ebraheem, 1984). These factors could range from political leadership to the forging of alliances or reliance on other states for aid to enhance their own relative power capabilities. Aiming to maximize its influence and regional outreach, Qatar's pragmatic foreign policy *modus operandi* extends to fostering personal linkages and support for various regional intermediaries, notably on the Islamic spectrum in Libya, Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania, Syria, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and the UAE.

In the Arab Gulf, Doha has a reputation for engaging and backing Islamist groups like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian militant organization Hamas, and a range of other groups in Syria, Libya, and the Taliban. Denouncing traditional Arab and Gulf norms, Qatar's foreign policy choices exude a combination of convenience, pragmatism, and sheer opportunism, which often leads to its castigation as a state with licentious international affairs or even the proverbial 'Switzerland of the Gulf' (Roberts, 2019).

Historically, Qatar has opted for an independent foreign policy streak, diverging from the prevailing Arab Gulf norms. In the 1980s, Qatar planned, along with Iran, the construction of a fresh water pipeline from Iran's Karun Mountains to Qatar, enraging the U.S. and Gulf monarchies alike (Roberts, 2019). As Qatar aspires to break free from Saudi domination by pursuing an independent foreign policy in the Gulf region, in 1988, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad

al-Thani gave Qatari foreign policy a similar taste by establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, a Saudi adversary. Before Sheikh Hamad took the reins of power in Qatar, a few incidents shaped his outlook against Saudi domination. The 1992 Saudi-Qatar border clash culminated in the deaths of two Qatari soldiers (Fisher, 2017).

The intricacies of Yemeni politics have perpetually frustrated the Saudis over and over again, giving them a long history of getting burned in Yemen. Political scientist Marc Lynch puts Sheikh Hamad's view as "Why be under Saudi's thumb when you don't have to be?" In the 1990s', after the unification of northern and southern Yemen, President Saleh backed Iraq in the Kuwait crisis. This motivated Saudi Arabia to plot an insurrection against Saleh in 1994 by employing and aiding the southerners, culminating in a brief civil war in which Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed opposing sides (Riedel, 2019). The 1990s witnessed Qatar forging ties with the Palestinian organization Hamas and also with the Lebanese Hezbollah. Apart from this, Qatar, along with Oman, transgressed the Gulf's rejection of Israel and established unofficial trade relations in 1996, which continued until Qatar permanently severed relations with Israel in 2009 (Roberts, 2019).

Being rooted in the U.S. sphere, Qatar's military agreements with the U.S. date back to 1992, which further led to the formalization and expansion of Washington's military presence in the region, such as in the Sayliyah logistical depot or the Al Ubeid air base, which remains the U.S. military's forward regional headquarters (Roberts, 2017). However, Washington's support for Israel has been so unpopularity perceived among the Gulf population that rulers typically resort to concealing the true extent of their relationship with the U.S. (Rabi, 2009).

On account of the Arab Spring, Qatar backed a range of revolutionary forces around the region, primarily inclined towards the Islamist spectrum (Dickinson, 2014). These interactions range from Qatar support to the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector, aimed at providing a political cover for the wider operation that resulted in the overthrow of former President Gadhafi, as well as its association with the Islamists to ferment revolution in Libya, culminating in a country-wide civil conflict against the nationalist and anti-Islamist forces of General Khalifa Haftar along with his UAE backers (Coker et al., 2011).

Aiming to cement its position and expand its influence in Egypt, Qatar staunchly backed the Muslim Brotherhood associated with the Morsi government (Roberts, 2014). During the Arab Spring, Qatar played a hybrid role in Syria. From hosting dozens of political conferences in

2011 onwards to working along with its Turkish allies in backing a range of militias, such as the Free Syrian Army, to groups like Jabhat Al Nusra, Doha earned a reputation for lending support to extremist groupings (Ulrichsen, 2014). Although Qatar is not the only state to engage with actors on the Islamic spectrum, countries like Turkey or Saudi Arabia have their own way of doing so (Roberts, 2015), Qatar's actions during the Arab Spring, especially its engagements in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, are seen as a state persistently engaging and backing the Islamists.

Post-Arab Spring, Qatar has largely been portrayed by its other Gulf neighbors as having an 'Islamist' agenda at the core of its foreign policy (Hassan, 2017), given the Qatari state's long-forged institutional ties and personal elite-level relations with non-state actors like Hamas, the Taliban, Jabhat al Nusra, the Houthis, and its affiliations with Mohammad Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government (Roberts, 2019). One of the Arab world's most prominent figures, theologian Yusuf Al Qaradawi, who sustained a life-long association with the Muslim Brotherhood, moved to Qatar in 1961. From being a TV personality to the establishment of the College of Sharia Law at Qatar University, Qaradawi undertook various roles in Qatar's public life, which significantly amplified his reach over the decades (Warren, 2014).

Following Qaradawi's arrival in Qatar, the Brotherhood appeared to be more active in the social, religious, and political spheres of Doha. With time, Qaradawi developed close relations with Qatar's ruling family, Al Thani, who welcomed his moderate religious views against a strict form of Salafism, allowing Qatar to have a distinct kind of liberal religious and social structure compared to countries like Saudi Arabia (Roberts, 2014). Another prominent figure of the Brotherhood, Muaz al Sattar, came to Qatar in the 1950s, playing a major role in assisting a newly independent country to establish an educational system (Akkaya and Al Rantisi, 2015). Hence, such experienced Brotherhood members played a vital role in molding Qatar's education system as well as other sectors of state building like public administration (Telci and Horoz, 2021).

In 2014, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors in protest at new Qatari emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's status -quo challenging foreign policy approach. In response to this, Qatar did make some concessions, such as evicting a few members of the Muslim Brotherhood from Doha and shutting down Al-Jazeera's Egyptian news channel. However, with time, the UAE's disagreements with Qatar became more apparent, Bahrain became irrelevant, and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah appeared to be prioritizing the Gulf monarchy over imposing sanctions on Qatar. However, with young Mohammed bin Salman

taking the reins of power, the prioritization of Gulf monarchy became anachronistic, leading to the 2017 Qatari blockade by the quartet (Roberts, 2019).

4. The Qatari Blockade

Qatar's strategic aspirations to opt for a foreign policy independent of the GCC apparently collapsed when Saudi Arabia and its allies imposed a blockade in 2017. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's diplomatic rift with Doha marked a division between the members of the GCC, undermining the unity of the organization and its efficacy as a regional bloc. On June 5th, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, referred to together as 'the Quartet', embarked on a unanimous decision to cut off diplomatic ties with Qatar over the claims that Qatar is financing Islamist groups hostile to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the region and its growing affinity towards Iran. The diplomatic suspension of ties was followed by the imposition of land and maritime trade sanctions on Qatar. Not all the GCC states backed the blockade. Oman allowed Qatar to use its ports, and Kuwait employed extensive diplomatic efforts to calm down the regional tensions. Arab countries like Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia also denounced the blockade. Bahrain, on the other hand, unequivocally backed the UAE and Saudi Arabia (Hanieh, 2017).

As per *The Intercept* reports, in the wake of the 2017 Qatar blockade, the former US secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, reportedly convinced Saudi-led troops against launching an attack on neighboring Qatar. Tillerson had disagreements with the Trump administration on varying issues, including the Qatar blockade. In the beginning of this diplomatic crisis, a coup largely devised by the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, aimed at circumventing the Al Udeid Air Base, home to the U.S. Air Force Central Command, and seizing Doha. Tillerson's efforts pressured Mohammed bin Salman to back down, as this invasion could potentially harm the long-term Saudi-U.S. relationship. However, the turn of events ultimately enraged the UAE crown prince, MBZ, following his subsequent lobbying efforts for Tillerson's removal and replacement by Mike Pompeo (Emmons, 2018) (Al Jazeera, 2018).

In order to mitigate the crisis, Qatar strategically employed its foreign policy to alleviate the land, aerial, and naval blockades imposed by the Quartet. Leveraging its role as a crucial energy supplier, its close proximity to the United States and Turkey, and its ties with Iran, Doha prevented the international consensus from molding in favor of the claims made by the Quartet

and the likelihood of military escalation (Al-Eshaq, Rasheed, 2022). Such an unprecedented attack was not new but an escalation of 2014 Qatar's diplomatic cutoff by the Quartet over claims of terror financing and destabilization of regional order. However, this time the Quartet put forth a list of 13 demands aimed at curbing Qatar's foreign policy ventures in the region, including ending its alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood, closing the Turkish military base in Qatar, closing Al Jazeera Media Network, and downgrading diplomatic ties with Iran (CNN, 2021).

Al Ula Declaration

Named after the Saudi Arabian city where the summit was held, the al Ula declaration was signed between the six GCC countries and Egypt with the aim of restoring collaboration with Qatar. The four main Arab states of 'the quartet' reconciled their ties with Doha to different degrees throughout the post al Ula summit, with Saudi Arabia and Egypt spearheading the reconciliation process (Cafiero, 2022). The reconciliation between Riyadh and Doha proceeded the fastest with the opening of the land-air border, followed by the establishment of the Saudi-Qatari coordination council. The UAE's distrust of Qatar owing to its links with the Brotherhood prompted both countries not to reopen their embassies until more than two years later, in June 2023. However, the 2022 FIFA World Cup aided well in accelerating the improvement of ties, with the UAE's prime minister, Mohammed bin Rashid al-Makhtoum, attending the opening ceremony in Doha. Bahrain, which is often seen as a minor player beholden to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, apparently took the longest to reconcile and put aside the differences with Qatar based on premises such as contesting territorial claims over Zubarah, an eighteenth-century fort, and the Hawar Islands, an archipelago off the Qatari coast. Manama's irritation also stems from Al Jazeera's highlighting of human rights violations in the country. Although both countries reconciled ties in January 2023, on the sidelines of a regional summit in Abu Dhabi, followed by the resumption of flights and the opening up of embassies (Jacobs, 2023).

5. Role of Ideational Factors

As per analysts, the rift between the gulf heavyweights is more stark than mere economic. The regional order in the Gulf is part of a broader regional system of the Middle East, consisting of a number of cluster factors such as power dynamics, ideational factors, and domestic aspects. In the era of the 1970s, inspired by the earlier nationalistic Arab movements upholding Islamic

principles, political Islam emerged as an ideological antithesis of a modernized and developed West. As a replacement for the declining secular Arab nationalism and failed imposition of Western culture, the rise of political Islam in the Middle East traces its origin to the motivation of providing local solutions to the problems of economic turmoil and political repression in the region (Soherwordi, 2013).

States in the Middle East have long struggled to promote civil liberties, competitive, free, and fair elections, and a pluralistic vision of Islam. The experiences of nations such as Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Iran underscore the critical role of political Islam as a force of change in the region. Leading to vital political gains for Islamists in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, the Arab Spring motivated scholars and policymakers alike to re-examine their comprehension of political Islam as a potent force in the Middle East.

Exploring the major subsystems in the region, P. O. Amour divides the region into 4 camps based on their attitude towards political Islam, including various regional state and non-state actors and their international backers. These four camps include the conservative-moderates (the Anti-Muslim Brotherhood; the KSA and the UAE), the conservative-resistance (case-dependent; Iran-led), the moderate-resistance (pro-Muslim Brotherhood; including the reform-minded Turkey, Qatar-led), and the moderate (anti-Muslim Brotherhood, reform-minded; Israel-led). Among the six wealthier nations of the Middle East: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman, the KSA and the UAE are the epitome of power projection capabilities in the region, with the United States of America as the international backer. (Amour, 2020).

Table 1.1: P.O. Amour’s regional subsystem in the Gulf Region and broader Middle East.

<i>Attitude toward Western states</i>	<i>Attitude toward Political Islam</i>	<i>Attitude regarding liberalism</i>	<i>By leadership</i>	<i>Major involved actors formal/informal alliance</i>	<i>International backer</i>
(Conservative-) moderate	Anti-Muslim-Brotherhood	Conservative-(moderate)	Saudi/UAE-led	KSA, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, <i>Yemeni Islah Party, Iraqi Islamic Party, Haftar’s Libyan National Army</i>	USA
(Conservative-) resistance	Case-dependent	Conservative-(resistance)	Iran-led	Iran, Syria, <i>Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad (Hamas 1991–2011), PMF, Houthi movement</i>	(Soviet Union)/Russia
Moderate-resistance	Pro-Muslim-Brotherhood	Reform-minded	Turkey/Qatar-led	Turkey, Qatar, Tunisia (2011–2014), Egypt (2012–2013), Libya’s Government of National Accord (GNA), <i>Ennahda, SNC, FJP, FSA, JCP (Hamas 2012–2016)</i>	Russia/USA
Moderate	Anti-Muslim-Brotherhood	Reform-minded	Israel-led	Approaching countries from the conservative- moderate power bloc	USA/Russia

The Complex Relationship between the UAE, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood

Often identical in many aspects, such as social structure, political life, and religious identity, there are sincere differences between the UAE and Qatar when it comes to one of the most important regional non-state entities, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood organization. Originating in 1928 in Egypt, the movement contributed to the development of political Islamic thought with its strong emphasis on social reforms and issues of social justice such as the right to adequate wages, educational services, and satisfactory social services (Wickham, 2013).

Owing to their contrasting policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood and the role of political Islam and pluralism in the Arab world, tensions have broiled between the UAE and Qatar since the 1990s, particularly in the period following the Arab Spring. Abu Dhabi's adherence to an authoritarian ruling model and its staunch opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood have been the key motivators of its threat perception towards Qatari foreign policy. The alignment of Qatar's foreign policy with the Muslim Brotherhood's political Islamist ideology appears to pose a risk to the UAE's secularist and pluralist aspirations in the region (Cafiero, 2022). Since its independence in 1971, Doha has fostered strong ties with the Egyptian social organization, but other nations in the Gulf, such as the UAE and, to a lesser degree, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, have opted for an anti-Brotherhood stance, being skeptical towards the movement, particularly post-Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 (Telci, Horoz, 2021). However, the UAE has its own history of engagement with the organization. From being a safe haven to its members facing political and administrative repression in Cairo during the Nasser era to the growing ideological rifts and exodus of the Brotherhood from Abu Dhabi.³

The Arab Revolution marks the diverging point in Qatar and the UAE's policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood that started in Tunisia in 2010. On account of the revolutionary uprisings taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, it became quite obvious that the Brotherhood would rise as the leading political figure out of this quagmire in the Arab region. Walking hand in hand with the movement, on the one hand, where Doha would back the process as this scenario ideally bolsters Qatar's regional influence, the UAE conversely perceived the MB as an outright threat to the Emirati leadership and stability in the region. In this context, Qatar backed the revolutionary uprisings in the hope that MB would assume governmental positions,

³ Read... Telci, İ.N., & Öztürk Horoz, T. (2021). Competing Policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: The Cases of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. *Siyasal: Journal of Political Sciences*, 30(2), 243-260.

but the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, were more inclined towards taking counter-revolutionary measures to curb MB's regional influence (Roberts, 2017).

The UAE and Qatar's approach to political Islam initially clashed in Libya in 2011 (during the Arab Spring), where Qatar aspired to rid the region of authoritarianism. The UAE, on the other hand, felt threatened by Qatar's backing of the opposition groups in the region, which may lead to instability. Here, Mohammed bin Zayed's vision of secular and centralized states being at odds with Qatar's support for the Islamists thus became the core of the Gulf rift (Davidson, 2019). In 2013, Abu Dhabi strongly bolstered the military coup in Egypt to topple President Mohammed Morsi, a member of the MB organization. To the extent of financing media channel coverage and running disinformation campaigns to damage the credibility of the Morsi government in the eyes of the Egyptians. All culminating in a military coup against a democratically elected government and takeover by Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, whose succession was hailed in the region mostly by the UAE (Telci, 2017).

This underlying political and ideological contention between Doha and Abu Dhabi surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood was the prime driver of the GCC crises of 2014 and 2017–21. Abu Dhabi was the main agent behind the 2017 blockade of Qatar, when a handful of Arab nations came together in order to contain Qatar. On the other hand, although Saudi Arabia designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2014, the existing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is mostly strategic in nature, as unlike the UAE, Saudi Arabia has depicted a pacifist stance in its opposition to political Islam. The UAE and the KSA's contrasting position with regard to Doha explains why, by early 2021, Riyadh was more inclined towards re-normalizing ties with Doha, putting behind the GCC crisis. Hence, Riyadh was the main agent of the al-Ula summit that culminated in lifting up the Qatari blockade (Cafiero, 2022).

6. Impact of External Forces in the Gulf Region

The Red Sea, Arabian Peninsula, and Persian Gulf region's strategic primacy echoes out loud, as external powers have always found themselves drawn to the region. The once poor, now rich Gulf Arab states are able to leverage their wealth in order to entice external actors to back them in their regional quarrels. The GCC integration project reflects the six states' collective interests, which are adequately aligned to strengthen the United States and the Western world's political and economic interests in the region.

Apart from oil and gas reserves, the United States and the Western world's extensive strategic involvement in the GCC states is overtaken by their military footprint permeating throughout the region. With Qatar's Al Ubeid air base hosting over ten thousand American troops, Qatar assists in the coordination of the United States military presence across the Gulf region, which previously included the military bases in Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States runs its principal military base, Naval Forces Central Command, and Fifth Fleet from Bahrain (Hanieh, 2017). This external military presence in the Gulf is intricately linked to the sale of military equipment in the region, particularly by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Reportedly, between 2015 and 2019, the six Gulf countries imported arms exceeding one-fifth of the global arms sold. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar ranked as the first, eighth, and tenth largest arms importers globally, respectively.⁴

As per David B. Roberts, in the face of the Gulf's hostile neighbors, Qatar aims to firm up its partnership with the U.S. Measuring the length and breadth of U.S. foreign policy in the region, Qatar is striving to make itself extensively useful, if not crucial, to the U.S. by leveraging its Islamist soft power in facilitating negotiations with Hamas, the Taliban, and other actors in the region (Roberts, 2019). In a move to counterbalance its regional rivals, Qatar, along with its allies Iran and Turkey, has long been accused of adhering to the strategy of hosting and backing Islamist political groupings in the region, particularly those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. This also includes bolstering Hamas's political wing since 2012. Since the 2017–2021 blockade, Qatar has extensively engaged in diplomatic maneuvers to safeguard its interests in a neighborhood wallowed in a combative power rivalry. This includes moderating high-level talks between the United States and the Taliban in 2020 and securing the release of U.S. prisoners held in Iran in 2023. This also facilitated the release of 110 hostages from Gaza and 240 Palestinian prisoners from Israel between November 24 and December 1, 2023. Previously, Qatar has mediated between Hamas and Israel in 2015, 2018, and 2021 (Mohammed, 2024).

Over the past few decades, Turkey and Qatar have fostered a seemingly cordial relationship, aligning their foreign policies on varying regional issues. On account of the 2017 Qatari blockade, risking its relations with countries that were part of 'the quartet', Ankara quickly

⁴ Trends in international arms transfers, 2019. SIPRI.

<https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2019>

came to help alleviate Qatar's physical and diplomatic isolation. Along with Turkish President Erdogan vocally calling out the imposition of blockades as inhumane and against Islamic values in his speech shortly after the announcement of the blockade in 2017.⁵ During the blockade, Turkey, under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), emerged as a staunch supporter of Qatar, facilitating Doha with economic and military support in addition to the diplomatic backing (Battaloglu, 2021). This Turkey-Qatar alignment in the ever-shifting material landscape of the Middle East highlights the role of ideational elements and norms along with material, domestic, and regional factors in shaping foreign policy approaches, having greater implications for the regional security order.

7. Conclusion

As per Gerd Nonneman, professor at Georgetown University, the diverging foreign policy choices of Riyadh and Saudi Arabia emanate from the changed international environment and evolving regional dynamics, especially with the advent of the Biden administration, which is perceived differently by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (Falk, 2021). Instances like the announcement of Saudi Arabia's Project HQ initiative, the Saudi-led OPEC+ push to cut oil supplies, and the ongoing diversification drive highlight the escalating economic competition and Saudi Arabia's hustle to dethrone the UAE as the Gulf's top foreign investment and tourist destination. This competition is most likely to be played in Yemen and OPEC and in the economic sphere around trade, investment, and tourism. Diplomatically, both nations will aspire to assume the role of regional arbitrator. Moreover, in recent years, the UAE has been on a reconciliatory diplomatic spree, normalizing relations with countries such as Syria, Turkey, and Iran, and foremost, formalizing relations with Israel by signing the U.S.-broken Abrahamic Accords. In an effort to dial down rising tensions amid regional adversaries, the Gulf Cooperation Council's historic al-Ula Summit held in 2021 marked a remarkable shift towards greater pragmatism in the UAE and Qatar's foreign policy agendas (Cafiero, 2022).

Rothstein's definition of small states aptly describes the external behavior of Qatar, as despite being a small state, Qatar was able to navigate the Quartet's systemic constraints and prevent a possible military escalation by leveraging its foreign relations with countries like Turkey, Iran, and the U.S., along with using its oil and natural gas supplies, to avert an international consensus backing the claims of the Quartet (Eshaq, Rasheed, 2022). Qatar seemed to have

⁵ BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). 2017. Turkey's Erdoğan Decries Qatar's 'Inhumane' Isolation. 13 June. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40261479>.

successfully navigated the sudden systemic shifts brought about by the blockade and the resulting crisis that ended in 2021 as Doha's ties with Iran and Turkey arguably became stronger and Al Jazeera still operated (Al-Eshaq, Rasheed, 2022). Qatar's engagement with a bunch of international actors is aimed at creating its image as an independent actor. This aids in forging Doha's reputation as an innovative and engaging international Gulf actor, often the Switzerland of the Gulf.

Qatar's positive attitude towards the MB arises from the movement's contributions to Doha's post-independence phase of state formation. This aided well in maintaining an effective and constructive perception of the organization for Qatar, which ideally supported the movement's revolutionary uprisings during the Arab Spring to the extent that it caused a serious rift in its relations with the other nations, namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt. The UAE, on the other hand, strives against the movement, perceiving its ideology and wide popular base as a direct threat to its domestic and foreign policy in the region. However, it continues to be a vital foreign policy instrument for Qatar, which has been seemingly loyal to the organization owing to its historical contributions.

Aiming to address one set of tensions, the Saudi-led Quartet's hedging against Qatar and its culmination in the Al-Ula agreement among the Gulf countries paved the way for new competition and regional rivalries. The proxy battles that occurred prior to and during the 2017–2021 blockade have waned away, but their ill-effects still linger, deepening the existing rifts. The UAE's apparent displeasure with Saudi Arabia over its decision to lift up the blockade on Qatar despite Qatar succumbing to any of the Quartet's demands, especially its linkages with the Islamists, and the disagreement over the war in Yemen have also exacerbated Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's political differences. There is no denying the fact that the GCC is facing a complex set of internal obstacles, namely that the two Gulf heavyweights are at odds with each other on various issues. This geostrategic rivalry can potentially harm the stability of the region and is a bane for intra-GCC cooperation. Moreover, the intra-Gulf competition is bound to intensify with the Israel-Palestine war taking place, as Qatar hosted three-way negotiations with Hamas, Israel, and the United States for hostage exchange, a ceasefire, and humanitarian aid (Mohammad, 2024). Although the Arab leaders seem united in their approach to the war, this war could prove to be another source of escalating regional tensions.

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