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# The GCC versus Iran: Low Intensity War, High Intensity Conflict

Ross Harrison

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## Abstract

The relationship between the Arab States of the GCC and Iran is anything but straightforward. This paper will try to unpack the dynamics of these relationships in all their complexity.

The argument this paper will make is that the ambiguous and complex nature of the threat from Iran has made resolution of the conflict more, not less, difficult. This paper will focus on three areas. The first will be the ambiguities of the multilayered nature of the conflict itself and the fact that it is taking place within a Middle East that has devolved into a degraded state system, riddled by civil war. The second ambiguity relates to the unbalanced and asymmetric threat perceptions of the protagonists. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain see Iran as their primary national security threat, while Iran sees the United States, and not the Arab states, as its primary nemesis. The third area of ambiguity is within the GCC itself, that is between the Arab states that see Iran as an existential threat and those which see Iran in less malign terms. These different perceptions of threat are based in different domestic political considerations, different interests with respect to Iran, and different strategic realities.

The paper ends with conclusions about the prospects for rapprochement between the GCC states and Iran. It looks at this in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and possible shifts in US policy toward the Middle East.

## Introduction

While conflicts that fall short of direct armed confrontation involve less human and physical carnage than outright war, they are often more impervious to resolution. The conflict between the GCC Gulf Arab states and Iran is particularly complex and immune to resolution because it has embodied both direct state-to-state as well as more indirect forms of confrontation. Occasionally direct state-to-state confrontation has broken out, such as when Saudi oil facilities were allegedly attacked by Iran or its proxies in 2019. But Iran and the GCC states mostly cross swords through lower intensity, indirect engagement at the substate level in the civil war environments of Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

The argument this paper advances is that this complexity of tensions between Iran and the GCC states has led to a corrosive ambiguity that has widened the conflict. It will focus on three areas that highlight how ambiguities of the conflict make de-escalation and rapprochement unlikely. These dynamics continue to be corrosive to the states themselves as well as to the broader region.<sup>(1)</sup> The first is the two-dimensional conflict system the Middle East region has devolved into. The civil wars in the region that have ensnared all regional actors in proxy wars, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel, represent one dimension. Here conflict takes place indirectly at the substate level in a degraded state system defined by failed and fragile states. The other dimension is the direct state-to-state rivalry for regional influence between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The interplay between these two dimensions of conflict have increased the complexity of the Iran-GCC relationship, making it a Gordian Knot that seems resistant to resolution.

The second ambiguity relates to the asymmetric threat perceptions of the protagonists. Saudi Arabia and UAE see Iran as their primary national security threat, while Iran sees the United States as its primary source of threat and nemesis. Iran sees the GCC states as an enemy only to the degree they are the tip of the spear of US efforts to project power into the region. The United States thinks it is providing clarity by playing a power balancing role, but it has added to the problem of Iran-GCC relations by putting its thumb on the scale in a way that plays to the worst instincts of all protagonists to the conflict, further exacerbating tensions.

The third area of ambiguity is within the GCC itself. Because of the diffused nature of the threat from Iran, there is wide variance among GCC states in how Iran is seen. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain see Iran as an existential threat and intent on becoming a regional hegemon. For these states negotiation with Iran is tantamount to appeasement. But Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman are less dogmatic and more pragmatic in seeing Iran as a rival, but not an existential threat. For them dialogue is essential for risk management. These variances across the GCC states are based in different domestic political considerations, strategic calculations, and economic interests.<sup>(2)</sup> But they have also weakened the fabric of the GCC and have played into the hands of Iran.

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1 M.L.R Smith, "Guerrillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare." *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 19 - 37.

2 See Larbi Sadiki, Layla Saleh. (2020) The GCC in Crisis: Explorations of 'Normlessness' in Gulf Regionalism. *The International Spectator* 55:2, pages 1-16, and Christofer Berglund & Emil Aslan Souleimanov (2020) "What is (not) asymmetric conflict? From conceptual stretching to conceptual structuring", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 13:1, 87-98



## Regional Conflict in 2D

It is impossible to grasp the intricacies of Iran-GCC relations without considering it within the context of the dysfunction of the broader Middle East. In other words, the ambiguity in this specific relationship is driven by the complexity of overall regional tensions, and the broader conflict system the Middle East has become.

There are two dimensions of conflict that play into the complex rivalry for regional influence between Iran and the GCC states. Together they create a vicious cycle that fuels the uncertainty and insecurities of countries on both sides of the conflict.

### Direct Competition: State-to-State Rivalries

The first dimension of conflict is direct state-to-state competition. In this dimension the GCC states and Iran compete for regional influence and dominance. Alliance systems, balance of power politics and conventional military prowess are the currencies of this interstate rivalry. The traditional economic and political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran fall into this category, as did the more lethal war between Iran and Iraq during the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE backed Iraq. The attacks on the Saudi oil facilities in 2019, presumably by Iran or Iranian proxies, also fall into the realm of direct state-to-state conflict, as does the dispute the UAE has had with Iran since 1971 over the three islands.<sup>(3)</sup>

The GCC countries are well positioned to compete against Iran in this conflict dimension. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain spend more than \$100 billion on defense, while Iran spends about \$16 billion.<sup>(4)</sup> When you add the qualitative edge to this quantitative advantage, the gap in favor of the GCC states grows even wider. The GCC states have the most up-to-date modern equipment supplied by the United States while Iran has older and technologically less advanced equipment. Add to this the fact that the United States has put its thumb on the scale to benefit the GCC states, while the only real state ally Iran has in the region is a significantly weakened Syria. Of course, Russia and China have tilted towards Iran, particularly since the United States walked out of the Iranian nuclear deal, but the depth of these commitments has yet to be tested.

But there is an aspect of this state-to-state rivalry that gives Iran an advantage over the GCC states. The role of the United States is a double-edged sword for the GCC states. While it gives the GCC states a conventional military advantage over Iran, it also breeds an insecurity because of the significant portion of their defensive and offensive capabilities they derive from the United States. In other words, a consequence the Arab Gulf states outsourcing part of their defense security to the United States is a kind of psychological insecurity.<sup>(5)</sup> This outsourcing is not just limited to arms sales and

3 Fatemeh Shayan, "Geopolitical Subjectivity in Iran-GCC Relations: The Three Islands Issue Since 1979", *Geopolitics* (18:633–661, 2013)

4 Anthony H. Cordesman "The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, And the Shifting Military Balance", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Second Working Draft*, 12 December 2018.

5 Jane Kinninmont, "Iran and the GCC: Unnecessary Insecurity", Research Paper: Middle East and North Africa Programme, *Chatham House*, July 2015, p. 6.

transfers, but also includes the security umbrella the United States has provided the Persian Gulf monarchies since the Carter Administration. With the Iranian nuclear deal, which the Saudis chafed over, the inaction on the part of the Trump administration when the Saudi facilities were attacked in 2019, and talk about U.S. withdrawal from the region, the security umbrella is no longer perceived by the GCC states as secure as it once was.<sup>(6)</sup> Whether that deepens Saudi suspicions and fears or leads to a recognition that diplomacy with Iran is the only viable path, is still an open question that will be somewhat determined by the tack taken by the Biden Administration.

## Indirect Competition: Substate Rivalries

But it is the second and more fluid dimension of conflict that helps us best understand why Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain paint Iran in apocalyptic terms, even though they have such a significant conventional military edge over the Islamic Republic.<sup>(7)</sup> This second dimension is the rivalry for regional supremacy taking place between the Arab states, Iran, and Turkey amid the wreckage of countries weakened by civil war and years of political decay. It is within the proxy battles taking place in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq that Iran has a distinct competitive advantage over the GCC states. The Iranians have built a capability of operating in the weak interstices of the region since the Iranian Revolution. Iran's own al-Quds force and the militias and substate partnerships it has established in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen give Tehran the capability it needs to thrive in this environment.

The GCC states have reason to be concerned about the formidable militia capability Iran has deployed to Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The civil wars that now plague the Arab world in many ways play to Iran's strategic advantage. Iran's playbook of projecting power into the Arab heartland by deploying militias in fragile states is rooted in a period prior to the Iranian revolution when the Iranian born Musa Sadr helped mobilize and organize the Shi'i in Lebanon. This was expanded upon after the revolution when Iran helped establish Hezbollah in war torn Lebanon in the 1980s. Also, Iran gained strategic advantage from the disorder stirred in Iraq by the toppling of Saddam Hussein at the hands of the United States in 2003, and from the civil wars that erupted in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen in 2011.

Working at the substate level in the Arab world became part of Iran's strategic doctrine largely because of lessons learned from the Iran-Iraq war, when the Arab states, except for Syria, supported Iraq. The message was that while Iran may be vulnerable to conventional military attacks from the Arab world, Israel and the United States, it can fortify itself by building up substate alliances in some of the weakest countries of the Arab world, such as with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and some of the Hashd al-Sha'bi militias in Iraq.<sup>(8)</sup> Iran also tried to fortify its influence in the Arab world

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6 Hal Brands, Steven A. Cook, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "RIP Carter Doctrine: 1980-2019", *Foreign Policy*, December 13th, 2019

7 Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer Li. "Arab Perceptions of the Iranian Threat." In *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 129 - 52. RAND Corporation, 2009.

8 Maysam Behraves, "Iran's Unconventional Alliance Network in the Middle East and Beyond" Policy Paper *Middle East Institute*, April 2020. Also, see Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Political Rationality in Iran's Foreign Policy", *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2017 and Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hash al-Sha'bi: State and Power in post-2014 Iraq" *Century Foundation*, March 5th 2018.



using soft power to promote itself as the self-proclaimed leader of an axis of resistance against the United States and its allies. This notion of Iran being a champion of self-determination was designed to resonate with the Arab populations on issues related to Palestine and other regional issues.<sup>(9)</sup>

Moreover, Tehran has exploited weakness within the Arab ranks to its strategic advantage. Iran has tried to use its relationship with Qatar as a cudgel for dividing the GCC. Iran, along with Turkey, exploited the 2017 - 2021 spat between Qatar and Saudi Arabia-U.A.E.-Bahrain to its advantage.<sup>(10)</sup>

Over the decades, the Arab world tried to develop a counterstrategy against Iran's rising regional power. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981, partially in response to the threat the Iranian revolution posed to the Gulf Arabs.<sup>(11)</sup> Prior to the Arab Spring and civil wars, Riyadh was able to maneuver around Iran. It tried to engage Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas to form a national unity government in Palestine in 2007, partially to limit Iran's ability to exploit cracks in the Arab political order.<sup>(12)</sup> But once the civil wars in the Arab countries started and Iran starting projecting power into them, it was clear that the GCC states were at a competitive disadvantage. The substate rivalry, where Iran had distinct advantages, became even more important to the regional balance of power as the more direct state-to-state competition.

More recently during the Trump era there was talk of forming a U.S. coordinated Arab NATO bulwark against Iran. But disarray among the Gulf Arab states and the lack of a rival set of sub-state alliances and militias, accentuated their disadvantage vis-à-vis Iran. While the Gulf states tried to compete with Iran ideologically through establishing madrassas, foundations, and religious institutions, they lacked the sub-state alliance network that would have acted as an effective counterforce against Iran.

While Saudi Arabia has tried to strengthen its hand in Lebanon and Iraq, the partnerships Iran has developed in these countries are stronger, have longer historical legacies, and have been incorporated into a broader strategy. In a region where state-to-state rivalry is mostly frozen, it is the substate rivalries taking place in the civil war zones of the Middle East that will likely determine whether the GCC states or Iran will prevail in the battle for regional influence.

## In Sum

The two-layered conflict system between the GCC states and Iran has already created a vicious cycle of violence and destructive competition. The proxy dynamics of the civil wars in the Middle East have led to a widening of the direct rivalry between the GCC states and Iran, engendering something approximating a regional civil war. The question is which of the two dimensions of conflict between the GCC states and Iran, the indirect conflict taking place in the civil war zones or the more direct

9 Saikal, A., & Vestenskov, D. "Iran's National Security and Operational Capability", *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 3(1), 2020 pp. 18–30.

10 Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran; Friends or Foes?* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, NY- 2016), p. 167

11 Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism, Opportunism" *Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, September 2018.

12 Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran; Friends or Foes?* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, NY- 2016), p. 221.

state-to-state conflict will be the most decisive in the battle for regional influence in the future? The answer to this partially depends on how long the civil wars go on, and how enduring the new rapprochement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE will be. Should the civil wars eventually wind down and the Arab political order become more unified, Iran's influence may be attenuated. But should civil wars and state fragility become chronic conditions in the region, Iran's distinct competitive advantages could lead to its continued and growing influence.

## In America's Shadow

It is not unusual for two sides of a conflict to perceive tensions differently. But the lopsidedness of the threat perceptions by the GCC states and Iran is profound. This lack of mutuality in threat perceptions has contributed to the ambiguity, complexity, and resistance to rapprochement.

Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Bahrain see Iran as a direct, existential threat, while for Iran the threat from the Gulf Arab states is less intense and mostly indirect. For Iran, the threat that is seen as existential is from the United States. The Arab states are only a significant threat to the degree that they represent the tip-of-the spear of US (and Israeli) efforts to undermine Iran.<sup>(13)</sup> For the Iranians the last significant threat they saw from the Arab world was from Iraq in the 1980s. Since then, the threat from the Arab world has been largely derivative of the threat Iran sees from the United States. The Israel-UAE-Bahrain rapprochement enshrined in the Abraham Accords could change this. If Saudi Arabia formally joins, the Arab-Israeli alignment could eventually pose more of a direct threat to Iran.

Aside from the asymmetry in threat perceptions between the GCC states and Iran, the involvement of the United States has further distorted the relationship, giving neither party the incentive for reconciliation. Since the Iranian revolution, the United States has used support for the Gulf Arab states as part of an effort to contain Iran. During the Clinton Administration there was the Dual Containment doctrine, which was aimed at counterbalancing against what was believed to be the two-headed menace of both Iraq and Iran.<sup>(14)</sup> The administration of George W. Bush saw Iran as part of the "axis of evil", and with urging by Saudi Arabia and Israel, it intensified efforts to roll back Iran's nuclear enrichment program. And other than the brief interlude of the Obama Administration, this pattern continued through the Trump Administration.<sup>(15)</sup>

The US factor has lent a bit of artificiality into the GCC-Iran relationship, making resolution that much more complex and difficult. It has intensified the threat perceptions of the Iranians, giving them additional incentives to hunker down further in the civil wars in the Arab heartland in order to build deterrence against the United States and Israel. Moreover, the United States has given little encouragement to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to resolve differences with Iran, particularly during the Trump Administration.

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<sup>13</sup> See Paul Salem and Ross Harrison, "The Layers and Limits of Diplomacy with Iran", *The National Interest*, August 3rd, 2020

<sup>14</sup> For the thinking of the Clinton Administration at the time, see the statement by Martin Indyk, who was the architect of the dual containment policy in, Martin Indyk "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East", Soref Symposium Conference Report, 1993, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*

<sup>15</sup> See Ross Harrison, "U.S. Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Pumping Air through a Punctured Tire", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, March 9th, 2019



## The United States and Saudi Threat Perceptions

Saudi threat perceptions related to Iran preceded the Iranian Revolution. In the early 1970s, after the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf, the Nixon Administration's Twin Pillars policy identified Iran and Saudi Arabia as the two American allies in the Middle East best positioned to help contain the Soviet Union. But it was clear to the Saudis that Iran, which bordered the Soviet Union and was the larger of the two countries, was the fulcrum of the U.S. containment strategy, a reality that fed insecurities and stoked fears in Riyadh.<sup>(16)</sup>

What is important about this period is that it shows that even when Iran and Saudi Arabia were on the same side of the Cold War political divide, insecurities vis-à-vis Iran were part of the Saudi political zeitgeist. While this threat became magnified after the Iranian Revolution, its roots run deeper than is generally acknowledged.

But the threat became obviously more profound after Iran's Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was overthrown in the 1979 Revolution, and when the new clerical regime in Tehran threatened Saudi Islamic legitimacy and leadership. Also contributing to Saudi angst were Iran's menacing threats to export the revolution into the Arab heartland, and fears that Iran could mobilize Shi'i populations in the Gulf monarchies against their Sunni leaders. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed in 1981 in response to several security threats, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq war. But the Iranian revolution was the primary shock that galvanized the Gulf Arab states into collective action.<sup>(17)</sup>

The intensity with which threat from Iran was perceived by the GCC states and the broader Arab world is evidenced by the support almost all Arab states, except Syria, gave to Iraq's Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. While the Gulf states were also wary of an aggressive and unbridled Saddam Hussein, they saw the prospects of a victorious Iran as an even greater threat.<sup>(18)</sup>

But today the threat from Iran is perceived by the Gulf Arabs no less intensely than in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution. The concern is that the current disorder in the Arab world, partially occasioned by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, is creating opportunities for Iran to realize its ambition of exporting its revolution. The toppling of Saddam Hussein gave Iran another portal through which to project power into the Arab world. Iran's entry into the civil wars in Syria and Yemen intensified the threat of an expansionist Iran into the Arab heartland. The Saudi refrain is that Iran is a bigger threat than ever, as it now presides over the Arab capitals of Damascus, Sanaa, Beirut, and Baghdad.<sup>(19)</sup>

16 Steven Brannon "Pillars, Petroleum and Power: The United States in the Gulf", *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 4-10

17 Giorgio Cafiero, "Iran and the Gulf states 40 years after the 1979 revolution", *Middle East Institute*, February 8th, 2019

18 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Gulf States in the Iran-Iraq War: Cooperation and Confusion" in Ashton, N., & Gibson, B. (Eds.), *The Iran Iraq War: New International Perspectives* (2012). Also, look at Majid Behestani, Mehdi Hedayati Shahidani, "Twin Pillars Policy: Engagement of US-Iran Foreign Affairs during the Last Two Decades of Pahlavi Dynasty", *Asian Social Science*, 2015/12/20

19 Conversations the author had with influential Saudi writer, Ali Shihabi, reflected this view



Saudi fears have been magnified by the perception that Iran has penetrated the domestic politics of the Arab states and is stirring up restiveness among Shi'i populations. In Saudi Arabia in particular, this is led to seeing Shi'i populations and opposition leaders as fifth columns, more loyal to Tehran than to Riyadh. The 2016 execution by the Saudis of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shi'i cleric, on the grounds that he invited foreign meddling, presumably an allusion to Iran, shows the degree to which the Saudi leadership sees Iran as a threat from within.<sup>(20)</sup>

These perceptions of threat from Iran in both the regional and domestic contexts make the Saudis particularly jittery when it comes to commitments from the United States. The Saudis see any negotiation between Washington and Tehran as tantamount to appeasement and potentially weakening the resolve of the United States to guarantee Gulf security. This contributes to seeing the competition with Iran in zero-sum terms, which precludes any serious negotiations that could lead to reconciliation. Saudi Arabia has become habituated into seeing Iran as a rogue actor, and any prospects for rehabilitation of Iran into the world community is considered a threat.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has been both emboldened and made to feel insecure by its alliance with the United States. During the Trump Administration, Riyadh was given encouragement to take a hardline position on Iran, and at least up until the 2019 Iranian linked attacks on its oil facilities, assumed Washington supported it. But concern over Washington's perceived fecklessness and tentativeness of commitments to Gulf security fed the Saudi sense of vulnerability. This added to Saudi perceptions of threat from Iran, leading Riyadh to eschew diplomacy.

## The United States and Iranian Threat perceptions

For Iran, the most intense threat perceptions are laser focused on the United States and Israel, and only secondarily on the GCC states.<sup>(21)</sup> This is what accounts for the asymmetry and ambiguity of threat perceptions between Iran and the GCC states.

It is important to juxtapose how Iran perceives threat from the United States, with how it views the GCC states and the broader region. Doing this requires we analyze three levels of threat perceived by Iran. The first is threat perceived directly from the United States, the second is threat from U.S. allies in the region, and the third is threat from Iran's regional environment.

In terms of a direct threat from the United States, there is quite of bit of history that has convinced the leaders in Tehran that Washington poses an existential threat. Except for a brief interlude under President Barack Obama, economic sanctions, threats of invasion, and endorsements by Trump's former NSC advisor John Bolton of the militant anti-regime Mujahedeen Khalq (MEK), have convinced Tehran that Washington's endgame is regime change.<sup>(22)</sup>

20 Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy*, "Multifront Cold War Between Riyadh and Tehran"

21 Saikal, A., & Vestenskov, D. "Iran's National Security and Operational Capability", *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 3(1), 2020 pp.21-22

22 Nilo Tabrizi, "M.E.K.: The Group John Bolton wants to rule Iran", *The New York Times*, May 7th, 2018.



The second layer of Iranian threat perceptions center around US allies in the region and is closely associated with the threat Tehran perceives from the United States. Iranian leaders see Saudi Arabia and the UAE as the tip-of-the spear of American efforts to undermine the Islamic Republic.<sup>(23)</sup> This is not to suggest that Iran sees no direct threat from the Arab world. In the 1980s Iran survived a bloody war with Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who was supported by the Gulf Arab countries. But even in that war, Iran saw the United States as driving Arab efforts to contain or even reverse its revolution. This was particularly the case after Washington tilted toward Iraq in 1982, once Iran gained the military offensive. The isolation Iran experienced during this period has not been lost on decisionmakers in Tehran, and threat perceptions forged during this period still animate Iranian foreign policy today.

Iran's strategy since the United States renounced the nuclear deal in 2018 has been to break through this US-Gulf Arab phalanx by demonstrating to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that the American security umbrella is a mirage. Through attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf and drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities, Tehran has shown the vulnerability of the GCC states and reinforced fears that the US may not be a reliable and consistent ally. In a sense Iran took a move out of the Russian playbook which had Moscow trying to pry western leaning countries like Georgia and Ukraine away from Washington's orbit by demonstrating that the United States will not come to their aid. Similarly, Tehran has tested the degree of commitment the United States has to the defense of the Persian Gulf through provocative actions taken in response to the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. These provocations were strategic probes for testing the resolve of Washington, but also were designed to send a message to the GCC states about the unreliability of the United States.

Whether the Iranian strategy of trying to drive a wedge between the Gulf Arabs and the United States will succeed has yet to be determined. There have been signs of a softening of the position of the UAE towards Iran around the Covid issue, but whether this becomes a trend will depend on the United States encouraging regional diplomacy under a Biden administration. It will also depend on whether there is any significant diplomatic activity between Iran and the hardline GCC states.<sup>(24)</sup>

The third level of Iran's threat perceptions lies in conditions of the Middle East region. While the civil wars in the Arab world are perfect terrain for Iran's strategy of using substate militias, it is not alone in its involvement in these conflicts. Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar are each involved in one or more of the civil wars in the region, turning the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and even Iraq into a proxy battle for regional influence. Even in Lebanon, where Iran's support for Hezbollah has changed the political landscape, US, Saudi and Israeli involvement do pose a threat to Iranian interests. While civil wars provide opportunities to Iran, these conflicts also pose the risk of decreased Iranian regional influence.

<sup>23</sup> See Ross Harrison, "U.S. Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Pumping Air through a Punctured Tire", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, March 9th, 2019, and Ross Harrison, "U.S.-Iran Showdown: Clashing Strategic Universes Amid a Changing Region", *Al-Jazeera Center for Studies*, April 16th, 2020

<sup>24</sup> Cinzia Bianco "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, (55:2) 2020, p. 94.

In response to these three levels of perceived threat, Iran has developed a “forward defense” doctrine to project power and influence through the region to protect the homeland. While this may simply be a convenient rationale, Iran clearly believes that it must create a curtain of deterrence against U.S. or Israeli attacks, and strategic depth to protect against threats from the region, including the GCC states.<sup>(25)</sup>

In sum, the United States has contributed to the ambiguity that undermines prospects for reconciliation between the GCC states and Iran. It has created complicated threat perceptions that make any breakthrough in relations a seemingly insuperable task.

## Gulf Cooperation Council: A House Divided

There can be wide range of threat perceptions among leaders even when faced with the most menacing of adversaries. England’s Neville Chamberlin and his successor as Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, interpreted the threat from Germany’s Adolf Hitler very differently. Chamberlin underestimated the threat and pursued an ill-fated policy of appeasement, while Churchill accurately perceived Hitler as the monstrous menace he was.<sup>(26)</sup>

But when the threat is more ambiguous and diffused, threat perceptions can vary even more widely. The variance in threat perceptions about Iran among the GCC states is a case in point. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain see threat from Iran more intensely and portray the Islamic Republic in more simplified and stereotypical terms than Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, which see Iran in more complex and less stereotypical terms.<sup>(27)</sup> While the former group of countries see Iran as an existential irredeemable threat, the latter sees it as a rival, but not a blood enemy. This variance is explained by differences in the strategic and economic interests across the GCC countries, different interpretations of Iranian motives by leaders, and different domestic political considerations.

But what also drives the variability across GCC states is the ambiguity of the threat from Iran. As menacing as Iran may be, the fact that Iran’s regional interventions are taking place largely at the substate level in fragile and failed states makes the threat appear somewhat diffused, at least to several of the GCC states. In other words, the unconventional nature of the overall Iranian threat means that different Arab states will interpret it differently.

Are there threat perceptions that most of the Arab states can agree on with respect to Iran? There is a shared view that Iran is exploiting the weaknesses in the region to advance its regional agenda. There is also unanimity that through its allied militias and its own al-Quds force Iran is successfully prosecuting its interests in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Beyond that, there is significant variance in the

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25 See Alex Vatanka “The Trajectory of the Iranian Military”, *Middle East Studies at the Marine Corp University, MES Insights*, Volume 8, Issue 6, December 2017.

26 See Tim Bouverie, *Appeasement: Chamberlain, Hitler, Churchill, and the Road to War*, (Random House, New York, NY: 2019) for an account of these different threat perceptions.

27 See Richard W. Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and a Case Study*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 1977) pp. 54 - 92.



intensity of perceptions of Iran's threat. While the hardline Saudi led bloc sees Iran as the nefarious center of regional disorder and hegemony, a more pragmatic bloc sees the struggle with Iran in the broader context of regional turmoil engulfing all major powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel. For them Iran is a rival, but not a blood enemy.<sup>(28)</sup>

### Hardline Bloc: Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain

There is no doubt that Iran poses an ideological and even a potential military challenge to the Gulf Arab states, and is a formidable rival in the race for regional geopolitical influence. But what accounts for the particularly hardline position of Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Bahrain? What distinguishes them from other GCC states taking more flexible and pragmatic stances with respect to Iran?

First, Iran has been rhetorically threatening Saudi Arabia since the revolution, challenging the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia to preside over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and the legitimacy of the monarchy itself. Moreover, it talks over the heads of Arab leaders on the issues of Israel and Palestine, appealing directly to their populations. Moreover, Iran has long taunted and belittled the Saudi royal family as stooges of the United States.<sup>(29)</sup>

Second, Iran has used targeted violence against Saudi Arabia and threatened military action against the UAE. The alleged 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States at Café Milano in Washington D.C., the sacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran in 2016 after the execution of Saudi Shi'i leader Nimr al-Nimr, and the reported attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, all represent aggressive challenges to Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies.

Third, Saudi Arabia sees itself as a regional leader of the Arab bloc of states. Iran's continuing influence over the political systems of Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria is a challenge to the leadership and regional political sensibilities of the Saudis.<sup>(30)</sup> Also, Saudi Arabia's close ally, the UAE has a territorial claim with Iran going back to 1971, when Iran under the Shah occupied the three Islands of Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb.<sup>(31)</sup>

Fourth, at the domestic level, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have restive Shi'i populations, a fact that Iran has used to its advantage. These Shi'i populations have been (and still are) perceived as fifth columns, seen as more loyal to Iran than to their own governments. While the UAE also has a Shi'i population, it has been mostly coopted by the elite and is less disenfranchised than the Shi'i populations of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Consequently it is seen as less of a threat to the regime in Abu Dhabi.

28 See GAWDAT BAHGAT, ANOUSHIRAVAN EHTESHAMI & NEIL QUILLIAM, *Security and Bilateral Issues Between Iran and its Arab Neighbors*, (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, NY: 2017) for Gulf Arab impressions about Iran.

29 Abdulmajeed Al-Saud, "The Iran-Saudi Conflict: The Saudi Perspective" a blog posted by *Harvard Kennedy School's, Belfer Center*; February 18th, 2016.

30 Jonathan Marcus, "Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are bitter rivals", *BBC*, September 16th, 2019

31 Cinzia Bianco "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, (55:2) 2020, p. 97.

Fifth, on the economic front, Iran has a far more diversified economy than Saudi Arabia. Should Iran become rehabilitated in the west and its economy reintegrated into the global economic system, Saudi Arabia would find it challenging to compete on equal terms.<sup>(32)</sup>

Finally, it is important to point out that these threat perceptions about Iran are perpetuated by the lack of an incentive to negotiate or seek rapprochement. The perceived security umbrella provided by the United States to the GCC has provided little impetus to change attitudes or stances toward Iran. The fact that Trump Administration kept Iran in its crosshairs gave the Saudis and Emiratis little reason to change their posture.

### Pragmatists: Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman

Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman do not see Iran as an ally or a benign actor, but they see it as more a source of risk than existential threat.<sup>(33)</sup> What accounts for this difference in threat perceptions?

There are several factors. One has to do with the degree of contact between these states and Iran. A history of diplomatic and commercial engagement has militated against an intensification of threat perceptions or adoption of overly simplified stereotypes about Iran. Qatar shares the Pars/North Dome gas field with Iran, and Oman and Kuwait have worked with the Iranians in the diplomatic arena to alleviate regional tensions as well as to mediate with the United States.

Second, these small GCC states have all experienced greater threats from other Arab states, and from home-grown domestic opposition movements, than from Iran. Kuwait was invaded by its Arab neighbor Iraq in 1991 and it was not lost on the Kuwaitis that Iran denounced Saddam Hussein's aggression. This was even more profound given Iran's experience of having to also stand up against attacks from Iraq a decade earlier.<sup>(34)</sup>

Moreover, these smaller states are concerned with Saudi Arabia's heavy-handedness, making relations with Iran a hedge against what they see as an increasingly assertive and dominant Riyadh. Qatar for example is more concerned about the dominance of Saudi Arabia than they are about Iran, a fear reinforced by the 2017 - 2021 censure and siege of the country by Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Bahrain – during which Iran (along with Turkey) gave Qatar a lifeline against the blockade by its Arab neighbors. Oman in addition received help from Iran in the 1970s whilst contending with an insurrection in the province of Dhofar.<sup>(35)</sup>

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32 David Gardner, "Iran poses an economic challenge to Saudi Arabia", *Financial Times*, January 26th, 2016.

33 Cinzia Bianco "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, (55:2) 2020, p. 100.

34 H. Alboshi "Iran and Kuwait" in A. Ehteshami, N. Quilliam, and G. Bahgat, eds, *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbors*: 123-48, (Palgrave MacMillan, London), 2017.

35 Eric Pace, "Iranian Troops Helping Oman to Quell Rebels", *The New York Times*, February 7th, 1975.



Last, these countries have relatively minimal restiveness on the part of their minority Shi'i populations, so are less vulnerable to manipulation by Iran. Except for Kuwait with its large Shi'i population, these states have relatively small Shi'i minorities.

In sum, the ambiguity of the threat from Iran means that it is interpreted differently by the various GCC states, which have their own unique strategic and commercial interests. Whether the hardline positions of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain can be reconciled with more accommodating views of Qatar, Kuwait and Oman, remains an open question for the future.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the GCC states and Iran can be thought of as a bellwether for the broader Middle East. The region is a zone of multidimensional conflict with tensions and rivalry between powerful and intact states like Iran and the Gulf States playing out in a field of failed states, like Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

But it is important to remember that battles for regional influence are not solely between Iran and the GCC states. All major regional powers have been drawn into the conflict zone the Middle East has become, including Turkey and Israel. Libya has become a proxy battle, but one where Iran is not even currently involved. In Libya the proxy conflict dynamic pits the UAE and Egypt on one side against Qatar and Turkey on the other. In other words, the GCC-Iran relationship has become hostage to the dystopian state of the entire region. The tense relationship between Iran and Gulf Arab countries is as much a symptom of what ails the region as it is about the intrinsic differences between these two parties.

But ambiguity in the Iran-GCC relationship serves to exacerbate the already tense situation. Iran's use of mostly unconventional means in the civil war zones of the Middle East, and the minimal threat of state-to-state aggression has contributed to the variety of interpretations among GCC states of the nature of the Iranian threat. While domestic politics and deep seated fears of Iranian ambition have animated the policies of Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Bahrain, commercial interests and the need for a balance of power with an increasingly aggressive Riyadh has led Oman, Kuwait and Qatar to more pragmatic policies.

Other dynamics no doubt add to ambiguity and tensions. The role of the United States has created imbalances that have exacerbated rather than soothed the conflict between the GCC states and Iran. Iran sees the United States as the primary source of threat, while Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. see Iran as the primary menace. This imbalance and lack of mutuality in threat perceptions has made the Iran-GCC relationship complex, contentious and seemingly immune to resolution.

However, the Covid-19 crisis offers an opportunity for some thawing of temperatures between even the hardline GCC states and Iran. Early in the pandemic, the UAE sent medical assistance to Iran. While this does not presage any broader forms of cooperation, it could be an indication that all parties



recognize that global and existential issues such as health and climate change cannot be resolved unilaterally and necessitate multilateral cooperation. A rebalancing of US policy toward Iran in the Biden Administration could create additional opportunities for cooperation between Iran and the GCC states. If this occurs, the Middle East region as a whole would certainly be the primary beneficiary.